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"Paul and the faithfulness of God" among Pauline theologies

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God and the Faithfulness of Paul

A Critical Examination
of the Pauline Theology of N.T. Wright

edited by

Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt,
and Michael F. Bird

Mohr Siebeck

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Paul and the Faithfulness of God among Pauline Theologies

Benjamin Schliesser

The life and work of N. T. Wright are associated with many superlatives,¹ as is his most recent scholarly publication, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Those who read and write on Wright's *magnum opus* do not spare sympathetic, respectful, and sometimes exuberant words on its size, scope, and scholarly significance. They acclaim the breadth of its author's learning, the depth of his thought, the accessibility of his prose, the lucidity of his argument, and also his pastoral wisdom, which elucidates the relevance of Paul for today and "for everyone." As with hardly any other book in biblical scholarship before, the "event" of its release arose great public interest: Prior to its publication bloggers made their bid to build up tension, and when the book was finally distributed, radio and TV stations conducted interviews, magazines printed articles, and academic institutions organized talks, panels, and conferences. Also, the present collection of essays is not the only volume exclusively dedicated to *PFG*.² It is tempting to quote some of his colleagues in order to illustrate the superlative impression made by his work in the field of Pauline studies. They describe the length, substance, readability, and significance of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* in superlative terms, calling it "the largest single-author work on Paul in print, perhaps the largest ever pub-

¹ See, as a telling example, the first paragraph of the cover story "Surprised by N. T. Wright" in *Christianity Today*: "People who are asked to write about N. T. Wright may find they quickly run out of superlatives. He is the most prolific biblical scholar in a generation. Some say he is the most important apologist for the Christian faith since C. S. Lewis. He has written the most extensive series of popular commentaries on the New Testament since William Barclay. And, in case three careers sound like too few, he is also a church leader, having served as Bishop of Durham, England, before his current teaching post at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland" (Jason Byassee, "Surprised by N. T. Wright," *Christianity Today* 58.3 [2014]: 36).

² See the 2014 spring edition of the *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* with reviews by Thomas Schreiner, Michael Gorman, David Starling, Martinus de Boer, Markus Bockmuehl, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, and Nijay Gupta, and with a response by N. T. Wright. See also, on Wright's earlier publications, Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays, eds., *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (London: SPCK, 2011).

lished" (Larry Hurtado),³ "the most complete account of its kind in existence today" (Markus Bockmuehl),⁴ "an enormous intellectual achievement" (Chris Tilling),⁵ and "not merely a page-turner; often, it is a paragraph-turner" (Michael Gorman).⁶ "This book will surely be the defining standard, the Bultmann for our age, the text from which everyone will work and argue and revise their (and his) thinking about Paul for the next decade at least" (Daniel Boyarin).⁷

In this essay, I intend to place Wright's magnificent monument in the landscape of Pauline scholarship, next to other such monuments, with the goal of comparing major features of their surface and deep structures. With the exception of Rudolf Bultmann's studies on Paul, the works of comparison are of recent date, and they all present a synthetic, large-scale monographic treatment of Paul's theology. The section on Bultmann therefore serves as a prologue to the dialogue between *PFG* and the "regular Pauline theologies" (*PFG* 1046n18) of James Dunn,⁸ Thomas Schreiner,⁹ Michael Wolter,¹⁰ and Udo Schnelle.¹¹ Comparing full-scale Pauline theologies rather than thematic monographs or commentaries proves attractive, as their authors cannot retreat

³ Larry W. Hurtado, "Review of N. T. Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*," *Theology* 117 (2014): 361–65 (361).

⁴ Markus Bockmuehl, "Wright's Paul and the Cloud of (Other) Witnesses," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 4 (2014): 59–69 (69).

⁵ Chris Tilling, "Paul and the Faithfulness of God: A Review Essay," *Anvil* 31 (2015): 45–69 (45).

⁶ Michael J. Gorman, "Wright about Much, but Questions about Justification: A Review of N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 4 (2014): 27–36 (28).

⁷ This quote is from Boyarin's endorsement (*PFG* i), of which the book contains ten – again, a possibly record-breaking number. The selection of praising remarks should not obfuscate the fact that there are also hard-hitting reviews. Among the harshest is John M. G. Barclay, review of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, by N. T. Wright, *SJT* 68 (2015): 235–43, which however is easily outranked by Paula Fredriksen, review of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, by N. T. Wright, *CBQ* 77 (2015): 387–91.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Michael Wolter, *Paulus: Ein Grundriss seiner Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011). A translation of Wolter's book is now available from Baylor University Press: Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, trans. Robert L. Brawley (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Udo Schnelle, *Paulus: Leben und Denken*, 2nd ed., de Gruyter Lehrbuch, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014). The first German edition from 2003 has been translated as Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). I will use the English translation where the text of the new German edition is identical with the translated one.

to a single exegetical problem or a single writing but have to keep in mind the whole of Paul's thought; they cannot be content with only seeing the pieces but have to arrange the puzzle so as to see the whole picture. I will first highlight prominent features of the Pauline theologies in discussion and then compare them selectively with Wright's account.¹² Most of the comparative issues raised in this contribution will be taken up in the other essays of the volume; a detailed exegetical assessment is therefore neither intended nor necessary.

1. Rudolf Bultmann and N. T. Wright

1.1 Paul as a Thinker of "Believing Existence"

Boyarin's placing of Wright next to Bultmann is indeed suggestive, though only future generations will be able to validate its verisimilitude: Both offer an innovative, "fresh perspective" on Paul, a panoramic view, highly influential and controversial in both the academy and the church; both put their hermeneutical cards on the table and play them with admirable rigorousness; both display a remarkable stability of their basic convictions; and both are committed to wrestling with the most fundamental historical and theological matters, with "Christian origins" and "the question of God." Yet beyond such external overlaps, a comparison will rather note irreconcilable differences, which Wright himself is eager to point out. Nonetheless, we will also identify unexpected correspondences.¹³

Bultmann did not publish a monograph on Paul's theology.¹⁴ However, he wrote an exceptionally influential and remarkably concise dictionary entry on

¹² See also my essay "Paulustheologien im Vergleich: Eine kritische Zusammenschau neuerer Entwürfe zur paulinischen Theologie," in *Die Theologie des Paulus in der Diskussion: Reflexionen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters Grundriss*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser, Biblisch-theologische Studien 140 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013), 1–80.

¹³ On Bultmann and Wright, cf. also Oda Wischmeyer's essay on hermeneutics.

¹⁴ Within the past two years three insightful articles on Bultmann's interpretation of Paul appeared: Richard B. Hays, "Humanity Prior to the Revelation of Faith," in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikael C. Parsons (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 61–77, 288–90; John M. G. Barclay, "Humanity under Faith," in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikael C. Parsons (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 79–99, 290–95; Christof Landmesser, "Rudolf Bultmann als Paulusinterpret," *ZTK* 110 (2013): 1–21. See also Angela Standhartinger, "Bultmann's Theology of the New Testament in Context," in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Mikael C. Parsons (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 233–55, 310–19.

Paul in the second edition of *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1930), which he penned during a two week stay at a health spa.¹⁵ There he presents the substance of Paul's theology in terms of a theological anthropology and lays out its basic structure; years later, he would recapitulate and develop his ideas in his *Theology of the New Testament*. According to Bultmann, the apostle did not think in metaphysical or cosmological patterns, but started from anthropology: God's acting does not manifest itself in supernatural events, but in the history of human beings. As a consequence, human existence presents itself as "prior to the revelation of faith" and as "under faith."¹⁶ Two important and related corollaries are associated with his disposition of Pauline theology: an existential-ontological and an epistemological one. First, the "revelation of faith" does not envisage the arrival of a cosmological entity, but rather the moment of the individual's decision to accept the kerygma – which is, in Bultmann's parlance, an "eschatological event."¹⁷ Second, this twofold disposition "presupposes, since theological understanding has its origin in faith that man prior to the revelation of faith is so depicted by Paul as he is retrospectively seen from the standpoint of faith."¹⁸ Existential analysis in its Christian form does not work from an objective, neutral standpoint, but only from the perspective of faith.

Particularly in the Anglophone world, it has become commonplace to see in Bultmann the prime example of a misguided anthropocentric reading of Paul. The dedicatee of Wright's monograph, Richard Hays, even branded him, retrospectively, his "great adversary."¹⁹ From the beginning of his publishing career, in his 1978 article "The Paul of History and the Apostle of

¹⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, "Paulus," *RGK*, 2nd ed., 4:1019–45. On the circumstances of the article see Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Eine Biographie*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 177.

¹⁶ Bultmann, "Paulus," 4:1031. See the disposition in Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955), 1:190–269 ("Man Prior to the Revelation of Faith") and 1:270–352 ("Man under Faith").

¹⁷ Cf. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:305–6.

¹⁸ Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:191. As will be seen, Michael Wolter takes a similar hermeneutical starting point.

¹⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed., Biblical Resource Series, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xxv. Cf. Hays, "Humanity," 62 ("a frequent reference and sparring partner during my doctoral studies"). Incidentally, with reference to Wright's grand overall project, Hays underlined that "no New Testament scholar since Bultmann has even attempted – let alone achieved – such an innovative and comprehensive account of New Testament history and theology" (Richard B. Hays, back cover of N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 [London: SPCK, 1992]).

Faith,” Wright chimed in with the anti-Bultmann tone.²⁰ But what of his most recent volume? Virtually every direct engagement with Bultmann strikes a critical, sometimes derogatory tone. In a nutshell, Wright insinuates that Bultmann eclipses central aspects of Paul’s theology: narrative/salvation history (including the Jesus story), the corporate and the transformational dynamics of Christian existence, and Paul’s Jewish identity.²¹ I will deal briefly with each of these reproaches, which all coalesce, in Wright’s view, with a far-reaching hermeneutical dissonance: “I persist in the claim that the best argument is always the sense that is made of whole passages in Paul rather than isolated sayings” – unlike Bultmann, who in his *Theology* is concerned with isolated sayings and largely disregards “actual arguments of whole passages” (PFG 965n532). Clearly, Wright puts his finger on weak spots of Bultmann’s theology of Paul, though some of his assessments require a closer look and must be reviewed in the light of Bultmann’s own hermeneutical program.

1.2 Bultmann’s “Non-Narrative” Paul

Wright interprets Bultmann’s disposition of Paul’s theology as reconceptualizing the gospel “in a non-narrative form” (PFG 457), but adds that in actual fact Bultmann “encoded his own basic narrative ... in his *New Testament Theology*, in which ‘Man Prior to the Revelation of Faith’ gave way to ‘Man under Faith’” (PFG 458). In a suggestive psychoanalytical effort, Wright enters into the mind of both the existential theologian Bultmann and the German nation when he says that

²⁰ N. T. Wright, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith” [1978], in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (London: SPCK, 2013), 3–20 (11, 15). In the widely read volume Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), originally written by Neill and updated by Wright, the comments on Bultmann are less polemical, but slightly ironical at times. Bultmann’s “great reworking of Pauline theology” (410) is said to resemble that of Luther: “Here is the life of faith, the glad response to the Gospel, the release from the shackles of a Judaism which corresponds so interestingly to medieval Catholicism. Such a scheme is eminently preachable, and there are still plenty of people preaching it, and believing it to be the heart of what Paul was saying” (412). Certainly, this is not “historically correct” (412). In N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (London: SPCK, 2015), Wright does not discuss Bultmann extensively but refers his readers to *The Interpretation of the New Testament* (and promises that a further edition of the book is in preparation).

²¹ Wright also takes issue with Bultmann’s “famous ‘Dass!’” (PFG 71), his idea that Christ is the end of history (PFG 141), his concept of “myth” (PFG 167–68, 457–58), the “gnostic” paradigm (PFG 459, 1261), his take on Jesus’s divinity (PFG 647), God’s righteousness (PFG 882, 991), the “I” in Romans 7 (PFG 896, 1016), and the correspondence between “indicative” and “imperative” (PFG 1098).

one can understand why someone whose national story had gone so badly wrong as Bultmann's had (fancy living in Germany through the first half of the twentieth century!) might want to sweep all stories aside. (PFG 457)²²

Bultmann's treatment opens the doors to a "very individualistic" misunderstanding of the apostle (PFG 778), as it is merely concerned with "a new understanding of one's self [that] takes the place of the old"²³ and potentially ignores "the larger whole of the church on the one hand, or of a continuous history of Israel on the other" (PFG 778). Along these lines, Wright also finds Bultmann's "rejection of 'the historical Jesus'" (PFG 1362) highly problematic. The "impact of Jesus' own life, his personality, his words and deeds, not to mention the drama of his death and resurrection" have been obscured by Bultmann and the "Bultmann school," even though it is "obvious to the naked eye" (PFG 649).

How does Bultmann set up his argument? For the Bultmannian Paul, history – and with it all stories and narratives – are "swallowed up in eschatology,"²⁴ eschatology being the goal of individual human existence. "The decisive history is not the history of the world, of the people Israel and of the other peoples, but the history that everyone experiences himself."²⁵ The key event is the encounter with Christ, which leads to the individual decision of faith, to eschatological existence. With sermoniac pathos, Bultmann said in his Gifford Lectures, delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1955:

*The meaning in history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realised. Man who complains: 'I cannot see meaning in history, and therefore my life, interwoven in history, is meaningless', is to be admonished: do not look around yourself into universal history, you must look into your own personal history. Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.*²⁶

²² More precisely, Wright thinks "that a great many Germans, by the 1950s, were looking back (a) at the Kaiser's regime, (b) at the first war, (c) at the Weimar Republic and of course (d) at the Nazis and the Holocaust, but also (e) at the rise of communist movements and governments in Eastern Europe, and were thinking, as Walter Benjamin obviously did, that 'the story' had gone so badly wrong that one should look for 'vertical' solutions instead" (private email-correspondence, 30 April 2015).

²³ Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:269 (quoted in PFG 778).

²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, "History and Eschatology in the New Testament," *NTS* 1 (1954/1955): 5–16 (11, 13, 16) (Bultmann's Presidential Address to the SNTS in 1953). See already Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung der Eschatologie für die Religion des Neuen Testaments," *ZTK* 27 (1917): 76–87 (in a *Festgabe* for Wilhelm Herrmann).

²⁵ Bultmann, "History and Eschatology in the New Testament," 13.

²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, The Gifford Lectures 1955 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 155.

Eschatology transmutes into the existential decision of the individual. History is swallowed up in eschatology, eschatology is swallowed up in the *Au-geblick*. The result is not only the loss of (salvation) history, as Wright has pointed out, but also a loss of eschatological alternatives to the state of affairs of the present culture.²⁷

As for Wright's psychologizing assumptions on the non-narrative shape of Bultmann's theology of Paul, one has to consider the remarkable fact that its basic structure and substance did not experience major modifications in the years between his *RGG* article (1930) and his *New Testament Theology* (1948–1953).²⁸ The horror of World War II did not change his basic view of Paul, nor did it affect his perspective on "narrative." I leave it undecided here how Bultmann's theological stability should be assessed, but it obviously is grounded in his foundational hermeneutical-theological conviction that no matter what the historical circumstances of Paul's interpreters are, the significance of his theology lies in affording to the Christian faith its adequate self-understanding, then and now.²⁹ In other words: The course of the world does not inform the question "what is faith?," but "faith gives the freedom to alter the world."³⁰ As faith is independent from historical circumstances, it does not and *must* not rely on (the story of) the historical Jesus. Bultmann does not reject the "historical Jesus," but reliance on the results of the quest for the "historical Jesus." Nevertheless, he is convinced that Jesus's eschatological message and the Pauline *kerygma* correspond, though Jesus looks into the future (the coming kingdom), Paul into the past (the presence of salvation).³¹ Wright's basic point of criticism, certainly, is valid: Paul is far from untying the devotion to Christ from the historical Jesus and from untying Jesus from the empirical people and the story of Israel.

²⁷ Cf., e.g., Jürgen Moltmann, "*Sein Name ist Gerechtigkeit*": *Neue Beiträge zur christlichen Gotteslehre* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2008), 23.

²⁸ Cf. Standhartinger, "Bultmann's *Theology*," 252–53.

²⁹ But see the trenchant comment of William Albright in a review of Bultmann's Gifford lectures; William F. Albright, "Bultmann's *History and Eschatology*," *JBL* 77 (1958): 244–48 (248): "He passes over the Nazi Abomination of Desolation in complete silence, 'wie ein römischer Senator' (to quote a letter from a Continental colleague written to me in the winter of 1945–46, with specific reference to the author of our volume)." Günter Klein rejected this as "impertinent accusation," claiming that this epoch did not produce a concept of history (*Geschichtsentwurf*), which would have to be dealt with in the book in question (Günter Klein, review of *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, by Rudolph Bultmann, *ZGK* 71 [1960]: 177). Surely, Bultmann's thinking as a whole did not remain unimpressed by Germany's devastating national story. See the chapter "Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Nationalsozialismus" in Hammann's biography (Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 255–74).

³⁰ From an unpublished letter to Dorothee Sölle, written in response to her book *Politische Theologie* in August 1971 (quoted in Standhartinger, "Bultmann's *Theology*," 255).

³¹ Cf. Landmesser, "Rudolf Bultmann als Paulusinterpret," 18–21.

1.3 Bultmann's "Non-Transformational" Paul

Wright not only finds fault with Bultmann's "non-narrative" reconstruction of Paul's theology but also with its "non-transformational" character. He takes issue with Bultmann's often-repeated statement concerning the change from the situation under the law to the situation under grace: "No break takes place; no magical or mysterious transformation of man in regard to his substance, the basis of his nature, takes place."³² He regards it as the elimination of "any notion of an *inner* transformation" (PFG 779) and attributes it both to the Reformation idea that the bestowal of grace is independent from an actual change in "nature," and to the "protestant nervousness about 'mysticism,'" which even "peeps out in contemporary writings" (PFG 779n13). It is important to note that, according to Wright, Paul does not refer to the "inner transformation" with the words "justification" or "righteousness," but by the idea of the "indwelling of the Messiah-spirit" (PFG 958).

In a helpful response to some reviews of his work, Wright specifies what he means by "transformation": He makes clear that his central thesis is "that Paul believed he was called ... to teach people to think Christianly." For Paul, the task of theology is encapsulated in the imperative "Be transformed ... by the renewal of your minds" (Rom 12:2). This corresponds to a "new, gospel-initiated way of 'knowing,'" and it was Paul's aim to get "Messiah-followers to think in a new way about new topics."³³ Wright's idea of "inner transformation" as a renewed way of knowing, as the "birth" of a new identity (PFG 860), is not incompatible with Bultmann's idea of a transformed, believing self-understanding, which is "a *how*, a way of life itself."³⁴ Both obviously place a particular emphasis on the "cognitive" dimension of transformation and its impact on Christian identity, or *Dasein*, as a whole. Now for Bultmann this has two consequences: First, only "under faith," i.e., from the perspective of believing existence, the revelation of faith and its implications can be understood, and only faith itself is able to apprehend the new status conferred by God.³⁵ Second, the very fact that "I believe," the indicative of salvation is not something that is perceivable by a natural, empirically verifiable "change of the moral quality of the human being," but by a re-

³² Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:268–69 (quoted in PFG 779).

³³ N. T. Wright, "Right Standing, Right Understanding, Wright Misunderstanding: A Response," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 4 (2014): 87–103 (92–93, partly italicized). Cf., e.g., PFG 1327.

³⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, "The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul," in *Faith and Understanding*, ed. Robert W. Funk, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1:220–46 (245).

³⁵ Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:191.

newed mind.³⁶ Bultmann's view might indeed be criticized for its one-sidedness, in particular its construal of faith as an "abstract" entity, but its theological thrust should not be ignored or misrepresented. Bultmann shares the idea of the abstractness of faith with Karl Barth,³⁷ though unlike Barth and contrary to what Wright assumes, Bultmann is not preoccupied with a clear-cut anti-mystical bias but rather expresses his disagreement with the biographical-psychological explanations of faith of the history-of-religions school.³⁸ Even in this regard, Bultmann remained remarkably consistent: Faith for him is a conscious decision ("obedience") but not objectifiable; therefore, it is invisible for psychological reflection, which is why the New Testament has nowhere described it "in terms of its psychological development."³⁹

1.4 Bultmann's "De-Judaized" Paul

Wright launches the most serious attack on Bultmann when he contends that "the deeper aim of Bultmann's analysis" was "a radical *deJudaizing*" of Paul (PFG 458).⁴⁰ Bultmann was "a massive and central figure" in the early twentieth-century effort to reconstruct early Christianity "in as unJewish a light as

³⁶ Bultmann defended this view in an early essay, in which he coined and developed the famous conceptual pair "indicative and imperative" as a characterization of Pauline ethics (Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Ethik bei Paulus" [1924], in *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments*, ed. Erich Dinkler [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967], 36–54, 49). Cf. Wright's discussion in PFG 447, 1098–1100.

³⁷ Barth expressed this concept in an even more radical manner. Cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief: Zweite Fassung 1922*, Gesamtausgabe II, Akademische Werke 47, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja (Zürich: TVZ, 2010), 184: "Der Glaube begründet Gewissheit, sofern er der ewige Schritt ins ganz und gar Unanschauliche und also selbst unanschaulich ist." The English translation is misleading; Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 134: "But faith establishes certainty when it is the advance into what is invisible and eternal, and when it is itself invisible." On Wolter's idea of faith's *Unanschaulichkeit*, see below. For an evaluation of PFG from a theological perspective – in dialogue with Karl Barth – see the contribution by Sven Ensminger.

³⁸ Cf., e.g., Wilhelm Bousset, "Paulus," *RGK* 4:1276–1309 (1302): faith as a "new religious basic mood (*Grundstimmung*)"; G. Adolf Deissmann, *St. Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), 147: "Faith is not the condition precedent to justification, it is the experience of justification."

³⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, "πίστις κατ'εξοχήν," *TDNT* 6:174–82, 197–228 (217, quoting Adolf Schlatter, *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament*, 6th ed. [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1982], 260).

⁴⁰ Beverly Roberts Gaventa has rightly noted that this statement goes beyond pointing out flaws in Bultmann's understanding of first-century Judaism; "it implies that Bultmann himself intended to separate Paul from his Jewishness" (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Character of God's Faithfulness: A Response to N. T. Wright," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 4 [2014]: 71–79, 79).

possible" (PFG 443n322) – just "like Marcion" (PFG 1290; cf. 1109). With sharp irony he comments that "the Lutheran existentialist knows that all things Jewish are, for Paul, part of the problem rather than part of the solution" (PFG 779) and that, since Bultmann,

we know that Paul rejected 'Judaism' and the 'works of the law' which stood at its heart; we know he was the 'apostle to the gentiles'; very well then, he must have left behind not only the specifics of self-righteous Jewish theology but also the thought-forms of Judaism as a whole. He must, therefore, have recast the message into non-Jewish forms, and we should try to discern what those forms were. (PFG 459)

Wright's far-reaching (and widespread) accusation that Bultmann intended to "de-judaize" Paul is to be confronted with Bultmann's own, quite sensitive remarks. It is off the mark to say that Bultmann "knows that all things Jewish are, for Paul, part of the problem" (PFG 779). Rather, according to Bultmann, "Paul knows nothing about the law being a burden for the subjective feeling of the Jew, and in his Christian fight against the law he never presents faith as the liberation of such a burden."⁴¹ The Christian message called into question the way to seek justification through works of the law, now that "God has inaugurated the time of salvation through the sending of the Messiah."⁴² Such assertions in fact come close to "New Perspective" tenets and do not quite fit in the "de-judaizing" allegations against Bultmann.⁴³ It was not Bultmann's main mistake to "de-judaize" Paul, but to "judaize" humanity and, in the same vein, to "de-ethnicize" Judaism. Judaism is for him the representative, indeed the climax of humanity,⁴⁴ though of a humanity that grounds its existence on its own activity. By way of his "pessimistic anthropology" he reached at a negative and indeed problematic portrayal of Judaism.⁴⁵

Bultmann's view that Paul was the most profound interpreter of Christian existence next to John is the result of a close and theologically committed –

⁴¹ Bultmann, "Paulus," 4:1023.

⁴² Bultmann, "Paulus," 4:1022.

⁴³ Cf. Oda Wischmeyer, "Paulusinterpretationen im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine kritische relecture der ersten bis vierten Auflage der 'Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,'" in *Paulus – Werk und Wirkung: Festschrift für Andreas Lindemann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Paul-Gerhard Klumbies and David S. du Toit (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 649–85 (664).

⁴⁴ Bultmann, "Paulus," 4:1022. The idea of the "Adamic nature of Israel" is also present in Wright's account (PFG 514, 894).

⁴⁵ Cf., e.g., Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:240 (on Phil 3:3–7): "This passage makes it especially clear that the attitude which orients itself by 'flesh,' living out of 'flesh,' is the self-reliant attitude of the man who puts his trust in his own strength and in that which is controllable by him." Rudolf Bultmann, "καυχᾶσθαι κτλ.," *TDNT* 3:645–54 (645–46): "For Paul, καυχᾶσθαι discloses the basic attitude of the Jew to be one of self-confidence which seeks glory before God and which relies on itself."

albeit one-sided – reading of the Pauline texts rather than an exercise in an arbitrary theological construction driven by questionable philosophical and history-of-religions, let alone “quasi-Marcionite” (cf. *PFG* 1109), presuppositions.⁴⁶ Is it carrying things too far if I suggest that the basic epistemological rationales of Bultmann and Wright resonate with each other? The bipartite structure of Wright’s book reflects Bultmann’s disposition of Paul’s theology: “Paul’s World” and “Paul’s Mindset” correspond to Bultmann’s “Man prior to the revelation of faith,” while “Paul’s Theology” and “Paul in His World” correspond to “Man under Faith.” *Sub specie fidei* all things are seen in a different light, a “radical mutation” (*PFG* xvi) of core beliefs is taking place. If Bultmann had read a statement like:

There is ... an *epistemological* revolution at the heart of Paul’s worldview and theology. It isn’t just that he now knows things he did not before; it is rather, that the *act of knowing* has itself been transformed, (*PFG* 1355–56)

he would have probably nodded his head.

After this preface on Bultmann we turn to more recent accounts of Paul’s theology, starting with a few remarks on their material basis, hermeneutical methods, structural designs, and their intended audiences.

2. Form, Style and Design

2.1 Material Basis: Paul’s Authentic Letters

The authors of the selected Pauline theologies made quite divergent decisions as to which letters they treat as authentic; such decisions reflect historical judgment as much as theological commitment.⁴⁷ The spectrum of opinions reaches from the critical “German” academic consensus about a seven-letter Pauline corpus (Schnelle, Wolter),⁴⁸ to the conviction that, in addition, 2 Thessalonians and possibly Colossians are authentic (Dunn),⁴⁹ to the forthright claim that Paul penned all thirteen letters traditionally attributed to him (Schreiner).⁵⁰ Wright himself comes close to the maximalist view: “Colossians is certainly Pauline, and to be used without excuse or apology,” both Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians are “highly likely to be Pauline,” 2 Timothy

⁴⁶ Cf. Francis B. Watson, “New Directions in Pauline Theology,” *Early Christianity* 1 (2010): 11–14 (11).

⁴⁷ On this issue, cf. also the essays by Eve-Marie Becker and Theresa Heilig and Christoph Heilig.

⁴⁸ Cf. Wolter, *Paulus*, 6; Schnelle, *Paulus*, 18–19 (= *Paul*, 41).

⁴⁹ Cf. Dunn, *Paul*, 13n39, 298n23, 733n21: “In my view Paul may have given his approval to Timothy’s penning of his message to the Colossians (Col 4.18).”

⁵⁰ Schreiner, *Paul*, 10.

resonates Pauline “style, mood and flavour,” much more so than 1 Timothy and Titus, which is why these two Pastorals are appealed to “for illumination rather than support” (*PFG* 61). A pithy comment in another context summarizes his reasoning:

Few seem to have noticed that Ephesians fits well with the ‘new perspective’; that if Paul was an ‘apocalyptic’ thinker 2 Thessalonians ought to be central; and that a ‘new perspective’ reading of Galatians fits well with the historically plausible early date and South Galatian destination. The pseudo-historical grin on the liberal protestant Cheshire Cat remains, long after the Cat itself has vanished.⁵¹

In the end, however, Wright wants to allow the smaller corpus of the undisputed seven letters to bear most of the argumentative weight, and from this group Romans and Galatians stand out (*PFG* 61).⁵² Obviously, the interpreter’s decisions regarding the number (and chronology!) of Paul’s letters is of utmost importance for their reconstruction of his theology and have to be kept in mind, even if their consequences cannot be discussed in greater detail here.⁵³ Beyond that, one should also note that the divergence concerning authenticity is emblematic for the apparent drifting apart of the German-speaking and Anglophone discourse on Paul. Wright seems convinced that on the whole Pauline scholarship experiences “a turn from Germany to America” and more generally to the Anglophone world. As a consequence, his interaction with German literature is rather limited, even though he himself bemoans that “just as older German scholars seldom cited non-Germans, the Anglophone world has often reciprocated.”⁵⁴

2.2 Method: How to Write a Theology of Paul

Without appealing to a specific hermeneutical or historical theory, Dunn talks about two methodological decisions that were formative for his attempt to write his theology of Paul: first, that his preferred model is that of dialogue, i.e., he seeks to “enter into a theological dialogue with Paul,” and second that

⁵¹ N. T. Wright, “Paul in Current Anglophone Scholarship” [2012], in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (London: SPCK, 2013), 474–88 (476).

⁵² Contrast Larry Hurtado’s impression “that Wright reads Paul essentially using Ephesians as the lens” (Hurtado, “Review,” 364).

⁵³ See Schnelle’s persuasive critique of Wolter’s methodological decision (Wolter, *Paulus*, 6) to take no account of the historical order of the letters so as to keep his account unaffected by disputed assumptions (Schnelle, *Paulus*, 18–19).

⁵⁴ Wright, “Paul in Current Anglophone Scholarship,” 475. Barclay criticizes that “less than 60 of the 1,300 items in the bibliography are in German” (Barclay, review of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [by Wright], 235n2). Wolter, on the contrary, is a case in point for the habit of “older” German scholarship, as he hardly takes note of the Anglophone discourse with the exception of a small group of “New Perspective” authors – not including Wright!

the starting point of this dialogue must be Romans, “the most sustained and reflective statement of Paul’s own theology by Paul himself.”⁵⁵ In effect, Dunn’s historical method comes close to what Wright calls “critical realism.”⁵⁶ Schreiner touches only lightly on the question of methodology, taking his lead from Adolf Schlatter and arguing that it is his goal “to see what Paul says and to see it in the right proportions.”⁵⁷ But Schlatter’s maxim “seeing what is there” carries within itself the challenge that “the task is so large that no one can claim to have seen all that is present in the documents before us.”⁵⁸ Both Schnelle and Wolter operate with a moderate constructivist approach. In Schnelle’s words:

The past event itself is not available to us but only the various understandings of the past event, mediated to us by various interpreters. History is not reconstructed but unavoidably and necessarily *constructed*.⁵⁹

Schnelle offers a most thorough account of his underlying theory of history, by means of which he seeks to illuminate the particular quality of Paul’s theology as being compatible with the ancient symbolic world.⁶⁰ In his preface, Wright point to the importance of making transparent one’s larger hypotheses. He labels his own methodological foundation “critical realism,” explaining that this method is not merely about assembling mere facts, but rather attempts “to make sense of them through forming hypotheses and then testing them against the evidence” (*PFG* xviii). “Critical realism” takes its place in between “naïve realism” and “narcissistic reductionism,” is aware that “objectivity” is unattainable but still explicitly aims at “truth,” “the truth in which the words we use and the stories we tell increasingly approximate to the reality of another world” (*PFG* 51).⁶¹

⁵⁵ Dunn, *Paul*, 24–25.

⁵⁶ While in Dunn’s theology of Paul the technical term “critical realism” does not occur, he explains in his book *Jesus Remembered* that (and how) the category of dialogue relates to this specific historical approach (James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 111).

⁵⁷ Schreiner, *Paul*, 16.

⁵⁸ Schreiner, *Paul*, 16.

⁵⁹ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 4 (= *Paul*, 28). Wolter is much briefer, but he too is convinced that all “reconstructions” of Paul’s theology are at the same “constructions” (Wolter, *Paulus*, 2; cf. 227).

⁶⁰ Schnelle is particularly indebted to Jörn Rüsen’s theory of history. (Unfortunately, with regards to these historiographical concepts, the English translation of Schnelle’s book is not always clear and consistent.)

⁶¹ For a fuller account see Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 332–37. Wright indicates (*PFG* xviii2) that he borrowed the phrase “critical realism” from Ben Meyer. For a detailed discussion of Wright’s notion of “critical realism,” cf. now the essay by Andreas Losch.

2.3 Design: Mapping the Landscape of Paul's Thought

The five authors also provide an insight into the decision-making process, which resulted in the structure and design of their respective books. Dunn chose to engage with Paul's "mature theology," which he finds in Romans and which reflects Paul's desire "to set out his understanding of the gospel in a fuller and in some sense definitive or final way" at a significant juncture in his missionary work.⁶² Using Romans as a template, Dunn is able to offer a coherent exposition of the themes which Paul addresses in his most elaborate letter, while recognizing that working primarily from Romans "does give less place to Paul the polemicist of Galatians and strong counsellor of 1 Corinthians."⁶³ Incidentally, these themes correspond to the traditional dogmatic *loci* and, furthermore, reflect a pattern that has been famously dubbed "from plight to solution," i.e., from "Humankind under Indictment" (ch. 3) to "The Process of Salvation" (ch. 6).⁶⁴ Schreiner notes that differently from Dunn he wants to take into account particularly "Paul as a missionary"⁶⁵ and his "apostolic sufferings."⁶⁶ In fact, the missionary dimension figures in the first chapters of his book, while the remainder basically walks in the paths prepared by Dunn, steering from chapters called "dishonoring God" (chs. 5–6) to one by the title "God's Saving Righteousness" (ch. 8): "The plight of human beings is such that a solution is needed."⁶⁷ Wolter claims for himself to have developed a distinct manner of organizing his account, being aware of the inherent inconsistency of this decision. In the chapter headings of his book "emic" terminology alternates with "etic" or "dogmatic" terminology; for instance, the chapter on the "Salvific Reality of Jesus' Death" (ch. 6) follows upon the chapter "The Faith" (ch. 5). Compared with the previously mentioned authors, his account stands out in placing the chapter on Paul's doctrine of justification right next to the chapter on ecclesiology. Schnelle, in line with his historiographical premises, chooses a bipartite structure for his book: A diachronic, historical part, which takes seriously the correspondence of Paul's life and thinking in its continuity and change, constitutes the foun-

⁶² Dunn, *Paul*, 26, 731–32.

⁶³ James D. G. Dunn, "Rejoicing in Dialogue: A Response to Lee Keck," *SJT* 53 (2000): 391–93 (391).

⁶⁴ E. P. Sanders had rejected the idea that Paul argued from "plight" (human sin) to "solution" (salvation through Christ); rather, Paul reasoned backwards, "from solution to plight": "For Paul, the conviction of a universal solution preceded the conviction of a universal plight" (E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [London: SPCK, 1977], 474; cf. 442–47).

⁶⁵ On the issue of missions in *PFG*, see Eckhard Schnabel's essay.

⁶⁶ Schreiner, *Paul*, 9.

⁶⁷ Schreiner, *Paul*, 150; cf. 119.

dation for a synchronic, theological synthesis, which is oriented at the classical dogmatic topics.⁶⁸

Wright's Pauline theology offers another distinctive structural plan. He deliberately decides against a combination of a diachronic and synchronic reading of Paul, as proposed by Schnelle, not for methodological reasons but for both practical and "biographical" reasons: The length of the work would expand unduly and, besides, the diachronic work has been accomplished by his previous publications, especially his commentaries, and by his lifelong studying, teaching, and preaching (*PFG* xix). Likewise, a "topic by topic"-approach in the manner of Dunn will not do because Paul's letters – "short but pithy documents" – must be investigated "from several angles all at once" (*PFG* 45).⁶⁹ Right at the beginning, the reader is supplied with a map that lays out the alternative approach in the book. It consists of four parts, "Paul's World" (chs. 1–5), "Paul's Mindset" (chs. 6–8), "Paul's Theology" (chs. 9–11), and "Paul in His World" (chs. 12–16). Wright says that "the real climax of the book" (*PFG* xv) is the Part III, which offers a fresh account of Paul's theology using as a framework "the three main elements of second-temple Jewish 'theology', namely monotheism, election⁷⁰ and eschatology⁷¹" (*PFG* 610). According to Wright, Paul has reworked these Jewish themes and in fact every single aspect of his native Jewish theology "in the light of the Messiah and the spirit" (*PFG* xv, 46, 455, 1093). Importantly, however, worldview-analysis must precede the analysis of Paul's theologizing. "Only when we have understood Paul's worldview do we understand why his theology is what it is, and the role it plays precisely within that worldview" (*PFG* 55). A worldview involves basic beliefs – "story," "praxis," "questions," and "symbols" – the sort of things that people habitually presuppose as they engage in issues such as theology. Metaphorically speaking, "a 'worldview' is not what you normally look *at*, but what you normally look *through*" (*PFG* 28). The structure of the book, therefore, reflects Wright's claim to first study the worldview, both in general terms (Part I) and focused on Paul (Part II); only then, the import of Paul's radical transformation of his central beliefs –

⁶⁸ Cf. Schnelle, *Paulus*, 25 (= *Paul*, 46).

⁶⁹ Wright also takes issue with the layout of other authors' studies of Paul's theology. For instance, he criticizes that in the books of Dunn, Schreiner, Wolter, and Schnelle "the church' and related topics [are] tucked away towards the back" and intimates (rightly so?) that their assumption is "that what mattered was sin and salvation and that questions about church life were essentially secondary, or even tertiary" (*PFG* 385n121). Furthermore, he asks whether it is adequate to treat eschatology as a separate topic at the end of a list, as in the just mentioned works. He attempts to treat it both as a separate topic and as fundamental category.

⁷⁰ On the concept of election, cf. the contribution by Sigurd Grindheim.

⁷¹ On individual eschatology, cf. the essay by Richard Bell. Cf. also Jörg Frey's essay on apocalyptic.

his “theology” – becomes comprehensible (Part III), and finally one can discern how he engages his theology with the wider cultural and religious context⁷² (Part IV).

2.4 Style and Audience: Paul for Everyone?

The concept of “dialogue” not only characterizes Dunn’s approach to the ancient texts but also his interaction with other, even controversial, scholarly opinions. In a judicious and non-polemical way he engages in a conversation with his colleagues and is prepared to think over his own standpoints without being self-opinionated. Despite the plethora of material dealt with, the lucid organization and the unpretentious jargon make the book accessible even to readers beyond the circles of biblical scholarship. Dunn’s theology intends to address a wider audience with the goal of not only enabling “the reader and the church ... to enter into the thought world of Paul but also to engage theologically with the claims he makes and the issues he addresses.”⁷³ Schreiner’s theology of Paul is purposefully written at an introductory level and lacks extensive interaction with secondary literature. It is his stated aim “to write a textbook on Pauline theology for students at both the college and seminary level” and to “introduce a fresh vision of Paul to students in a relatively non-technical way.”⁷⁴ Throughout his professedly evangelical Pauline theology, Schreiner seeks to overcome the “nasty gap” between Paul’s time and our time; the intended result is a Pauline theology “that is not only informative but spiritually uplifting as well.”⁷⁵ Wolter proposes to demonstrate the inner coherence and unity of Paul’s thinking, epitomized by the notion of “Christ-faith.” Wolter’s book is characterized by an admirable conceptual clarity and terminological precision. At the same time, he is not slow to launch sharp attacks against his colleagues; in particular, he goes after Schnelle, whose views on the history-of-religions background of central Pauline ideas and on the participatory structure of Paul’s theology he deems objectionable. In line with German academic tradition, Wolter does not address directly the contemporary reader of his book, though the virtually omnipresent talk of “identity,” “reality,” “construction,” etc. shows that Wolter has written his work from the perspective of current philosophical discourses. Both Paul and his communities had to wrestle with the question of the “Christian management of identity,” as Wolter repeatedly calls to attention,⁷⁶ and this obviously asso-

⁷² The aspect of ancient religions is discussed by James C. Hanges.

⁷³ Dunn, *Paul*, 8–9. Dunn asks for the contemporary (ecclesial) relevance of his findings mostly in brief interjections and in greater detail in the chapter “Innovative and Lasting Features” (733–37).

⁷⁴ Schreiner, *Paul*, 9.

⁷⁵ Schreiner, *Paul*, back cover.

⁷⁶ E.g., Wolter, *Paulus*, 389, 423, 434, 443.

ciates them with “postmodern”⁷⁷ Christianity, which is *per se* a “pluralistic affair.”⁷⁸ Schnelle’s volume is designed as a textbook and has soon become the standard work on Paul’s theology in the German-speaking world (and via its excellent translation has also entered English-speaking scholarship). Characterized by an admirable structural and expository clarity it covers all essential facets of Paul’s life and thinking, and it documents in a non-polemical manner a wide spectrum of scholarly positions. At the same time, Schnelle’s study reflects a deeper hermeneutical concern, which is to show “how the New Testament traditions can be appropriated without destroying the committing force of the truth they contain.”⁷⁹ There is a clear link between Paul’s and our time. Paul “set forth the meaning of the new being in Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ) and lived it out within the horizon of the Lord’s parousia. This is the bond that unites him with Christians of every generation.”⁸⁰

Wright’s book is the product of a brilliant, prolific writer.⁸¹ There is not a single page in the book that creates the impression of Wright retreating into the academic ivory tower, tackling abstract historical questions. Rather, Wright’s work is earthed in history, he haunts Paul in his world and brings him into ours. He is interested in the set of questions “that confronts the scholar, and for that matter the preacher and teacher, today” (*PFG* 37).⁸² Throughout, he is skeptical about those exegetes who postulate unnatural and unnecessary either/or-schemes in their interpretation of Paul (cf. *PFG* 865). Nowhere does he discern tensions or contradictions in Paul’s thinking; rather the different Pauline “circles of thought” all co-exist in harmony. For instance, the five stories in Paul (the story of God and the cosmos, the story of Christ, the story of Israel, Paul’s story, and the story of believers) “do actually have a coherent interlocking shape, nesting within one another like the sub-plots in a play” (*PFG* 474). Likewise, the central topics in Paul’s theology – seven in number: justification, anthropology, being in Christ, salvation history, apocalyptic, transformation/deification, covenant – all “have proper roles to play, and ... each needs the others if it is to be understood in the way Paul understood it (*PFG* 777); they, too, “cohere and nest within one another throughout” (*PFG* 966). Wright’s gracious, integrative approach to Paul is not paralleled in his conversation with Paul’s interpreters. Within Paul, he

⁷⁷ For an analysis of *PFG* in relation to postmodernity, cf. the essay by James Crossley and Katie Edwards.

⁷⁸ Wolter, *Paulus*, vii (“pluralistische ... Angelegenheit”).

⁷⁹ Udo Schnelle, “Neutestamentliche Theologie als Sinnbildung,” in *Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft: Autobiographische Essays aus der Evangelischen Theologie*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Uni-Taschenbücher 2475 (Tübingen: Francke, 2003), 135–45 (135).

⁸⁰ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 1 (= *Paul*, 25).

⁸¹ On the hermeneutical significance of Wright’s style, cf. Oda Wischmeyer’s essay.

⁸² For the relation between *PFG* and the church, cf. the essays by Andrew McGowan and Edith M. Humphrey.

emphasizes coherence, in relation to his fellow exegetes he tends to highlight demarcation lines. Both areas of discourse, the synthetic reconstruction of Paul's argument and the scholarly discussion, exude Wright's extraordinary argumentative and rhetorical gift as well as his wit and astuteness. Mostly, they are an asset, but – as noted by Beverly Roberts Gaventa – they sometimes run “out of control.”⁸³ To be sure, the passages that contain extensive debates with other scholars are both illuminating and entertaining. I am thinking of his critical dialogue with Francis Watson on hermeneutics, Larry Hurtado on early high christology,⁸⁴ John Barclay on Paul's anti-imperial theology, J. Louis Martyn and Martinus de Boer on the “apocalyptic” reading of Paul,⁸⁵ or Troels Engberg-Pedersen on Paul and Stoicism.⁸⁶ Yet his engagement with his opponents – particularly with the three last-mentioned – is not always *in optimam partem*, his criticisms occasionally misguided, and at times his style even descends to caricature.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Wright is not slow to point out that exegetical tradition and/or all exegetes “fail to realize” or “miss” or “overlook” important insights, which in the end set them on the wrong track. To give just one example: He claims that his soteriological model offers a “bigger picture,” convicting “traditional western soteriology, whether catholic or protestant, liberal or conservative” of serious short-sightedness (*PFG* 755).⁸⁸ While some might indeed enjoy the seething volcanic force of Wright's prose, others will much rather appreciate the sober restraint of a James Dunn, to whose *Theology of Paul the Apostle* we now turn.

3. James Dunn and N. T. Wright

3.1 *Paul as a Jewish-“Nazarene” Theologizer*

James Dunn's monograph on Paul, which appeared in 1998, has rapidly established itself in the Anglophone world “as a standard point of reference

⁸³ Gaventa, “The Character of God's Faithfulness,” 79. Abundant references of uncharitable rhetoric are given in Tilling, “Review Essay,” 64–67.

⁸⁴ See now Larry Hurtado's response in this volume.

⁸⁵ Cf. Jörg Frey's comments on Wright's engagement with those scholars.

⁸⁶ Cf. Gregory Sterling's essay on this topic.

⁸⁷ The very expression “caricature” is used in the reviews of Hurtado, “Review,” 362; Tilling, “Review Essay,” 64; and Barclay, review of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (by Wright), 235.

⁸⁸ Bockmuehl, “Wright's Paul,” 66n16 refers to other such claims and comments: “While anyone would gladly receive such dramatically clarifying instruction, purple rhetoric of this kind might also be more persuasive if it engaged a little more patiently with dissenting points of view in traditional Western scholarship, whether classic or modern, liberal or conservative, Anglophone or allophone.”

because its scope is comprehensive, its discussions thorough, its arguments clear, and its stance positive.”⁸⁹ Dunn designs his work, as it were, as a “dialogue within a dialogue,”⁹⁰ that is to say that he conceives of Paul’s theology itself as a dialogue *and* that he describes his own hermeneutics as a dialogic enterprise. According to Dunn, Paul’s own theologizing can be characterized as a dynamic interaction on several levels: He interacts with his “inherited convictions or traditional life patterns,” with his life-changing encounter on the Damascus road, and – most immediately – with the addressees of his letters.⁹¹ As an exegete of Paul’s letters, Dunn wishes to “theologize with Paul,”⁹² applying a hermeneutical model that defines interpretation as a “dialogue with a living respondent.”⁹³

It is not necessary to call attention to the fact that one of the great innovations in more recent Pauline scholarship is associated with James Dunn. In fact, he is generally considered the name giver to the “New Perspective on Paul,” and he provided decisive impulses on the route to a fresh understanding of his theology.⁹⁴ On this way, Wright has been his constant companion, which is why Dunn and Wright, together with E. P. Sanders, happened to be labelled the “three musketeers of the so-called ‘New Perspective.’”⁹⁵ To be sure, in the course of time, Dunn himself rethought and reworked several aspects of his portrayal of Paul,⁹⁶ but his basic tenet persisted: “‘Justification by faith’ was Paul’s answer to the question: How is it that Gentiles can be equally acceptable to God as Jews.”⁹⁷ In one of his provocative theses, which

⁸⁹ This prediction, expressed by Leander Keck in a thoughtful review of Dunn’s book, has proven true (Leander E. Keck, review of *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, by James D. G. Dunn, *SJT* 53 [2000]: 380–89 [389]).

⁹⁰ Dunn, *Paul*, 17.

⁹¹ Dunn, *Paul*, 18; cf. 713.

⁹² Dunn, *Paul*, 24.

⁹³ Dunn, *Paul*, 8.

⁹⁴ Cf. James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul” [1983], in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 89–110. But see James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul: Whence, what, whither?,” in *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–88 (7n24) where he credits Wright with the first recorded use of the phrase “new perspective” (cf. Wright, “Paul of History,” 10). Wright himself recalls that “Dunn was sitting in the front row when I gave the original 1978 lecture” (Wright, “Paul in Current Anglophone Scholarship,” 475n3). For a continuation of this dialogue, see now Dunn’s essay in this volume.

⁹⁵ Simon J. Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 16. A critical analysis of Wright’s version of the New Perspective on Paul is provided by Peter Stuhlmacher in this volume.

⁹⁶ Cf. above all his comprehensive essay “Whence, what, whither?,” which contains balanced and partly self-critical reflections.

⁹⁷ Dunn, *Paul*, 340.

brought several critics to the scene, he suggests that Judaism at the time of Paul “misunderstood” the ideas of the law and Israel.⁹⁸ Thus, Paul’s “eschatological criticism” of the law is not directed at the law *per se*, but at his fellow Jews who mistakenly believe that their exclusive, privileged status remains valid, even though their Messiah has already come.

The mistake was all the worse since Gentiles were being persuaded to follow suit. They were being persuaded that they too had to enter inside Israel’s protective boundary when the promised blessing was already more freely available outside.⁹⁹

The Jewish people failed to realize that the function of the law as a “guardian angel”¹⁰⁰ is temporary and that the coming of Christ has instigated an eschatological, indeed apocalyptic turn of the eras: The new and final stage of God’s dealing with humankind implies that the law belongs to the “passé, fleshly column.”¹⁰¹ All efforts to maintain the status of privilege are predicated by Paul as sinful,¹⁰² since such efforts represent a distortion of “God’s greater purpose to extend his call to all.”¹⁰³ Dunn is, however, keen to emphasize that Paul does not replace Israel’s restrictiveness with a new, Christian restrictiveness; “he does not say ‘not of law, but only of faith,’ but ‘not only of law but also of faith.’”¹⁰⁴

Another, related concern of Dunn is to demonstrate the largest possible degree of continuity between Paul, the Pharisee, and Paul, the follower of Christ. For Dunn, it is a serious mistake to argue – as does, for instance, Jürgen Becker – that “the Christian Paul has almost entirely disposed of the

⁹⁸ Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, “‘The Works of the Law’ in the Epistle to the Romans” [1991], in *On Romans: And Other New Testament Essays* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 1–14 (13): Dunn “actually reduces Paul’s argument to polemic against a misunderstanding.” Stephen Westerholm counts a total of six “misunderstandings,” which Paul finds with his opponents (Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 190–92). See, as a response, Dunn’s chapter “A wrong attitude/a misunderstanding” in the aforementioned essay “Whence, what, whither?,” 26–33.

⁹⁹ Dunn, *Paul*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Dunn, *Paul*, 141, 143–44, 515.

¹⁰¹ Dunn, *Paul*, 147.

¹⁰² Dunn, *Paul*, 119. Dunn makes clear that in his opinion Paul does not have in mind “self-reliance” (against Rudolf Bultmann), but rather “national reliance.”

¹⁰³ Dunn, *Paul*, 519.

¹⁰⁴ Dunn, *Paul*, 378n181. With respect to the encounter between Paul and Peter in Antioch, this theological aspect has been discussed in Christoph Heilig, “The New Perspective on Peter: How the Philosophy of Historiography can Help in Understanding Earliest Christianity,” in *Christian Origins and the Establishment of the Early Jesus Movement*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture* 4 (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

Jewish period of his life.”¹⁰⁵ Rather, Paul “remained a Jew and an Israelite,” and his “conversion” was not from one religion to another, but from one theology to another, or rather: “from one form (or sect) of the religion of his people (Pharisee) to another (Nazarene).”¹⁰⁶ In effect, Paul’s conviction that righteousness is from faith deeply corresponds to Jewish “covenant theology,” which attributes Israel’s status before God to his grace. Dunn goes as far as to claim that Paul’s teaching on justification is, in its essence, “simply a restatement of the first principles of his own ancestral faith.”¹⁰⁷ As a consequence, even though Dunn allots the law to the “fleshly column,” he sees Paul as defending the law wherever possible¹⁰⁸ and confirming its potential to serve as “a guide to life/living” even for Christ-followers.¹⁰⁹ The argumentative rationale for this seeming inconsistency lies in Dunn’s distinction between a “primary” and a “secondary” righteousness. When Paul, for instance, appeals to Lev 18:5 (Gal 3:12; Rom 10:5), he has in mind that the law is “a guide for living”¹¹⁰ (= “secondary righteousness”) relevant for the covenant people, i.e., for those who are justified by faith (= “primary righteousness”). From this perspective, Israel’s key misunderstanding can be restated: It confused the two kinds of righteousness and gave the righteousness from the law “a more fundamental status – as something required of Gentile believers as much as the primary righteousness.”¹¹¹

The dialogue between Dunn and Wright is best introduced by a word of Wright, which encapsulates his appraisal of their scholarly relationship:

For much of my career I have been in implicit and sometimes explicit debate with Jimmy Dunn ... Since we are often lumped together under the broad and now unhelpful label of ‘new perspective’, it is worth noting that despite much two-way traffic of thought our disagreements loom at least as large, in my mind at least, as our agreements. (*PFG* 925n426)¹¹²

A number of such disagreements and agreements shall be pointed out in the following, starting with their respective take on the “fresh perspective” on

¹⁰⁵ Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 33.

¹⁰⁶ Dunn, *Paul*, 179.

¹⁰⁷ Dunn, *Paul*, 345.

¹⁰⁸ Cf., e.g., Dunn, *Paul*, 98, 157, 472, 645–46, 721.

¹⁰⁹ Dunn, *Paul*, 154, 179, 725.

¹¹⁰ Dunn, *Paul*, 721; cf. above all the chapter “A law for life? – or death?,” in Dunn, *Paul*, 150–55.

¹¹¹ Dunn, *Paul*, 516.

¹¹² In fact, a cursory glance at the references to Dunn in *PFG* indicates that Wright cites Dunn largely in order to reject his position.

Paul and followed by their approach to the questions of “narrative” and “christological monotheism.”¹¹³

3.2 Two “New Perspectives” on Paul

In his already mentioned first essay on Paul, which appeared five years prior to Dunn’s famous “The New Perspective on Paul,” Wright had argued that justification by faith is “a polemical doctrine, whose target is not the usual Lutheran one of ‘nomism’ or ‘*Menschenwerke*,’ but the Pauline one of Jewish national pride.” Moreover, it is “a polemical doctrine because it declares that the way is open for all, Jew and Gentile alike, to enter the family of Abraham.”¹¹⁴ While in this early statement on the polemical nature of Paul’s doctrine of justification Wright sided with Wrede and Schweitzer, the tone has changed *en route* to *PFG*. There he says that Schweitzer was wrong “to suggest that ‘justification’ was a mere polemical tool for use in key debates” (*PFG* 1140) and that he cannot emphasize too strongly

that the reason Paul regarded Jesus as Messiah was not because of polemical intentions in relation to his own idiosyncratic plan to include gentiles without them being circumcised ..., but because, and only because, he believed that Israel’s God had raised this crucified would-be Messiah from the dead and that therefore ... his messianic claim had been demonstrated beyond question. (*PFG* 905)¹¹⁵

Dunn’s and Wright’s emphases and modes of expression differ, but both agree that Paul reacts against Jewish exclusivism that binds membership in the elected people to distinctive badges of Sabbath observance, dietary laws, and circumcision.

¹¹³ I will not deal with their dissenting views on the pre-existence of Christ (*PFG* 534n202, 686n212), baptism (*PFG* 418n233), Paul’s *parousia*-teaching (*PFG* 1084n181), and the “divided self” (Rom 7:14–20) (*PFG* 1016), etc.

¹¹⁴ Wright, “Paul of History,” 10; cf. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 261. Both Dunn and Wright agree that Luther significantly misunderstood Paul, with Wright occasionally coming close to simplistic generalizations (cf., e.g., *PFG* 499: Lutherans tend to say “that God has cut off the Israel-plan and done something completely different”). See further Wright, *Climax*, 258–59; N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion Books, 199), 120.

¹¹⁵ But see also *PFG* 962: Paul’s doctrine of justification “is central, not marginal; polemical, yes, but not *merely* polemical.” He criticizes Michael Bird for lumping his view together with those of William Wrede and Albert Schweitzer (*PFG* 962n522; against Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007], 30).

On the other hand, both scholars represent a “thesis of continuity to Judaism.”¹¹⁶ In accord with Dunn, Wright makes clear that Paul “was, and remained, a Jew” (*PFG* 205). “He has not abandoned his Jewish roots and meanings, but simply gained a radical new insight into them” (*PFG* 1422), and the Torah has a positive significance, even for believers in Christ (*PFG* 1109). In fact, Dunn’s distinction between a “primary” and a “secondary righteousness” (not spelled out by Paul!) is paralleled by Wright’s talk of the difference between the “works of the law” which cannot justify and the “work of law” which enables even gentiles to reach toward the real intention of the law. Regrettably, says Wright, Paul never made plain this difference as precisely as we would like him to do (*PFG* 1109). Presupposed argumentative gaps on Paul’s side, such as these, should at least urge caution and not backhandedly be transformed to central pillars in one’s own argument. Furthermore, Wright rephrases Stendahl’s insight into the continuity between Saul of Tarsus and Paul the apostle, locating it “near the heart of the so-called ‘new perspective’”: “the same God, the same ‘religion’, the same overall narrative, but just a new task” (*PFG* 1420; cf. 542–46). What Dunn identifies as Israel’s misunderstanding reappears in Wright’s account – with a different, likewise debatable emphasis – as “Israel’s failure.” He speaks of “Israel’s failure (and Paul’s own earlier failure) to understand what was going on,” now that the (single) original purpose of God is unveiled (*PFG* 500). Her “sinfulness” relates to her “abuse of Torah as a charter of national privilege” (*PFG* 533), but also to her “failure to be ‘faithful’ to the vocation to be the light of the world” (*PFG* 927n429), indeed, “to rescue and bless the world” (*PFG* 839). Wright’s repeated claim concerning the designated salvific role of Israel should expect serious, well-justified criticism. John Barclay contends that Wright is unable to produce Jewish texts that support the claim that Israel was God’s means to rescue the world,¹¹⁷ and with respect to Paul’s reasoning Larry Hurtado maintains

that for Paul it was Jesus and the gospel that produced the question of whether Israel had ‘fallen’ irreparably (Rom 11.11), and not a putative prior failure of Israel as elect people that had then required Jesus to take on Israel’s elect status single-handedly, and then convey it to the Church.¹¹⁸

Despite much agreement on central “New Perspective” insights, Wright takes issue with a number of Dunn’s positions. Most importantly, he seems to marvel at Dunn’s stubbornness to appreciate the benefit resulting from a narrative

¹¹⁶ The phrase has been coined by Christian Strecker in his report “Paulus aus einer ‘Neuen Perspektive’: Der Paradigmenwechsel in der jüngeren Paulusforschung,” *Kirche und Israel* 11 (1996): 3–18, 11. On the broader issue of Wright’s assessment of early Judaism, cf. James H. Charlesworth’s contribution.

¹¹⁷ Barclay, review of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (by Wright), 239.

¹¹⁸ Hurtado, “Review,” 363.

hermeneutics: “To this extent my proposal here about the ‘real nature’ of the NP is not only controversial but polemical” (PFG 460n14).

3.3 *The Grand Narrative – an “Idée fixe”?*

Dunn contends that the multilayered character of Paul’s theology could also be recast in the language of narrative theology.¹¹⁹ He could speak of the story of God and creation, the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, which intertwines with Paul’s own story at a decisive turning point, and finally the stories of Paul’s fellow believers, which partly interrelate with Paul’s story.¹²⁰ Though Dunn allowed for the possibility to structure his account of Paul’s theology according to different stories, he obviously decided not to follow this strategy. In keeping with his goal “to grasp at and dialogue with the mature theology of Paul,” he chose to take Romans as a template to organize his account of Paul’s theology. Elsewhere, he states more clearly that he prefers to work from the actual argument of Paul’s letters rather than from a presupposed underlying narrative. In order to distinguish his approach from the narrative analysis of Richard Hays, he says: “The trouble is that neither Galatians nor Romans is a narrative but an argument.”¹²¹ On a more subjective and humorous level, he states “I confess that when I see a Greimasian diagram laid out in preparation for the analysis of a text I *groan inwardly* ... the deeper the structures discerned, the more banal they usually seem to me” (cf. PFG 475n52, 487).¹²² At this point we could evaluate, for instance, the disagreement between Dunn and Wright in the “faith of/in Christ”-debate as part of their dissenting construal of the story of Jesus,¹²³ but it seems more pertinent to point to *the* narrative in Wright’s theology: the exile.¹²⁴ Wright voices his surprise that Dunn (and Sanders) never worked out the idea of continuing exile – even though “the texts were there to tell them they should” (PFG 140–41). In fact, Dunn thinks that Wright has exaggerated the significance of

¹¹⁹ Dunn, *Paul*, 17–18.

¹²⁰ Dunn, *Paul*, 18.

¹²¹ James D. G. Dunn, “Once More, ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ” [1997], in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, by Richard B. Hays, 2nd ed. Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 249–71 (270).

¹²² James D. G. Dunn, “The Narrative Approach to Paul: Whose Story?,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 217–30 (220).

¹²³ Cf. PFG 836n181 (referring to Dunn, *Paul*, 384–85): “Dunn ... claims that the ‘flow of argument’ in the key passages supports the ‘objective’ reading of *pistis Christou*, but it is precisely the flow of argument in Rom 3 that provides the strongest case for the ‘subjective’ reading, at least in 3.22.”

¹²⁴ The authors in this volume are also divided concerning this question: See Moyise and Stuhlmacher for a sceptical stance towards this interpretative figure and see White’s essay for a defence of it.

the motive of the “return from exile” in Paul (and in Second Temple Judaism) and in a footnote dismisses his “Israel-in-exile”-perspective as a misguided “*idée fixe*.”¹²⁵ What remains in the end is an irreconcilable methodological antagonism: Wright speaks glowingly of his insight that

narrative analysis sheds a positive flood of light – direct light, not surreptitious moonbeams – on passage after passage of tricky exegesis, and problem after problem in the theological coherence of the letters, (PFG 475)

surmising that if Dunn had integrated a narrative perspective into his hermeneutics, the unsolved problems Dunn himself concedes would immediately be illumined (PFG 475n52). Dunn, on the contrary, cautions:

We should heed postmodernism’s warning against uncritical dependence on grand narratives, against the superimposition of a unitary meta-narrative on much more complex data.¹²⁶

Many readers and most reviewers seem to share Dunn’s uneasiness with Wright’s idea of a “single narrative,” into which all of Paul can be fitted.

3.4 “Christological Monotheism”

With a twinkle in his eye, Dunn noted in a review of Larry Hurtado’s *Lord Jesus Christ* that he considers himself “a (slightly deviant) member of the Early High Christology Club.”¹²⁷ This comment expresses both his reservations concerning an early development of a high Christology and his agreement with the thesis that Jesus-devotion originated in the circles of Jewish believers. In his interpretation of Pauline texts, Dunn shows a clear focus on passages that distinguish God and Christ. The fact that Paul addresses his thanks to God, not to Christ, that he glorifies God, not Christ, etc. should, according to Dunn, “make us hesitate before asserting that Paul ‘worshiped’ Christ.”¹²⁸ When Paul attributes the lordship of God to Jesus in 1 Cor 8:5–6, the confession of God as one is compromised not in the least. Rather, “the lordship of Christ was not thought of as any usurpation or replacement of God’s authority, but expressive of it.”¹²⁹ Dunn stresses that in the light of the

¹²⁵ Dunn, *Paul*, 145n90. The index of Dunn’s theology does not even feature the term “exile.” While in his *Theology of Paul* the actual engagement with Wright’s proposal is minimal, subsequent publications on Paul, but also on Jesus, go into greater detail (cf. the lengthy remarks in Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 473–77; see the following footnote).

¹²⁶ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 477.

¹²⁷ James D. G. Dunn, “When was Jesus First Worshipped? In Dialogue with Larry Hurtado’s *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*,” *ExpTim* 116 (2005): 193–96 (196).

¹²⁸ Dunn, *Paul*, 259.

¹²⁹ Dunn, *Paul*, 253, with a reference to Wright, *Climax*, 121, 128–32. Interestingly, on Rom 9:5 Dunn comments that, possibly, Paul’s christological reserve “slipped at this

revelation of Christ Paul *did* have to redefine his inherited faith in God as one, but not in terms of a “complete redefinition,” which could be a threat to Jewish inherited convictions.¹³⁰ In *this* respect, he agrees with Wright, though he remains skeptical whether this redefinition of monotheism is best expressed by Wright’s phrase “christological monotheism,”¹³¹ which regards Jesus both as Messiah and as the human embodiment of the return of God. Wright himself would probably feel (more or less) comfortable in the “High Christology Club,” even if one of the leading voices in this circle feels grossly misrepresented by his account¹³² and even if Wright himself comments that “the inscriptions on the coffee-mugs that were distributed among the members of the ‘Early High Christology Club’ ... have themselves shown a tendency to fade over time” (PFG 647n97). Throughout his work he highlights Paul’s Jewish-style, but christologically redefined, monotheism and holds “that monotheism is indeed at the heart of Paul’s theology” (PFG 37). He explicitly follows Richard Bauckham’s proposal of a “christology of ‘divine identity,’” which includes Jesus “in the unique identity of this one God.”¹³³ In the end, Wright deems it almost inconceivable that after the work of Hengel, Hurtado, and Bauckham one should want to “go back to the older days of Bousset and Bultmann (or even of Dunn, Casey, and Vermes)” (PFG 647).

4. Thomas Schreiner and N. T. Wright

4.1 Paul as a Preacher of God’s Saving Righteousness

Thomas Schreiner’s *Paul*, written primarily for the needs of students, could be regarded as an evangelical counterpart to Dunn’s work. Schreiner is convinced that all thirteen letters of the *Corpus Paulinum* are authentic, and he

point,” but that one should not hear the benediction as “a considered expression of his theology” (*Paul*, 257). Dunn summarizes his point as follows: “If we observe the ancient distinction between ‘worship’ and ‘veneration,’ we would have to speak of the veneration of Christ, meaning by that something short of full-scale worship” (*Paul*, 260). On Rom 9:5 see PFG 707–9.

¹³⁰ Dunn, *Paul*, 293.

¹³¹ Several times in his *Theology of Paul*, Dunn cites Wright’s phrase “christological monotheism” (30n6, 253n100, 293n126), though he cautions: “Whether a redefinition in terms of a phrase like ‘christological monotheism’ best restates that faith [*sc.* faith as God in one] remains an item for the ongoing dialogue. We see tensions within the monotheism so defined” (718).

¹³² Hurtado complains that “Wright offers more of a caricature of my proposal than an accurate characterization of or engagement with it” (Hurtado, “Review,” 362).

¹³³ Cf. PFG 651–52, citing Richard Bauckham. At the same time Wright is critical of attempts to identify Jewish “divine agent”-traditions as one possible background of Paul’s christology.

also uses Acts “as a reliable historical source.”¹³⁴ He chooses a somewhat lopsided metaphor to describe the various dimensions of Paul’s theology: “the foundation is God and Christ, salvation history portrays the progress being made on the house, and the theme of the house is the gospel.”¹³⁵ Among the distinctive features of Schreiner’s book is not only his conservative stance but also his treatment of Pauline topics that others tend to pass over, such as mission, suffering, or gender roles. Discerning the center of Paul’s thought, Schreiner seeks to argue “inductively” from within the letters, not imposing an external rationale. He describes this center as “God’s glory in Christ,” “God’s work in Christ,”¹³⁶ “the centrality of God in Christ,”¹³⁷ or as “the supremacy of God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ,”¹³⁸ obviously implying that these descriptions convey one and the same thing.¹³⁹

Schreiner’s chapter on “God’s saving righteousness” documents a major shift in his thinking. He contends that the nature of righteousness is forensic rather than transformative. Note by contrast his argument on Rom 6:1–14 in his commentary on Romans.

This point is crucial for Paul’s argument. Justification cannot be separated from sanctification ... Only those who have died with Christ are righteous and thereby are enabled to conquer the mastery of sin. Many commentators have struggled with the use of *δεδικαίωται* [Rom 6:7] in a context in which power over sin is the theme because they invariably limit justification to being declared righteous. The use of the verb in this context, however, suggests that righteousness is more than forensic in Paul. Those who are in a right relation to God have also been dramatically changed; they have also been made righteous. This is confirmed by the language of being enslaved to righteousness (cf. 6:18, 20, 22); believers have been transformed by the Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:8–9).¹⁴⁰

Within three years, a radical change of mind occurred, triggered by conversations with Bruce Ware and Don Carson.¹⁴¹ Now, Schreiner forthrightly argues “that righteousness is forensic rather than transformative.” “In other words, God declares us righteous and does not make us righteous.”¹⁴² In terms of the relationship between justification and transformation, Schreiner says:

The forensic and the transformative are not merged together here [Rom 5:19], but we do see that the legal is the basis of the transformative. Paul never confines the gospel to the

¹³⁴ Schreiner, *Paul*, 9–10, 42n8.

¹³⁵ Schreiner, *Paul*, 20.

¹³⁶ Schreiner, *Paul*, 9.

¹³⁷ Schreiner, *Paul*, 18.

¹³⁸ Schreiner, *Paul*, 35.

¹³⁹ See also the title of Schreiner’s New Testament theology: Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁴⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 319; cf. 63–71.

¹⁴¹ Schreiner, *Paul*, 192n2.

¹⁴² Schreiner, *Paul*, 205.

idea that we have been declared righteous before God. To be declared righteous without living righteously would be a monstrosity and an impossibility.¹⁴³

The agent enabling transformation is God's spirit. Schreiner suggests that the gift of righteousness is the basis for the gift of the spirit, who empowers the righteous ones "to live in a new way."¹⁴⁴

In his Pauline theology Schreiner speaks very respectfully of Wright's exegetical insights and notes that "in many ways I stand in agreement with Wright and have profited significantly from his scholarship."¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, some major differences remain. Schreiner rejects Wright's understanding of God's righteousness as covenant faithfulness and, more generally, thinks that Wright "goes astray" insofar as he adopts tenets of the "New Perspective."¹⁴⁶ Wright's critical dialogue with Schreiner in *PFG* revolves mainly around Paul's understanding of justification, and this is also the focus of Schreiner's lengthy review of *PFG*.¹⁴⁷

4.2 Justification and Transformation

According to Schreiner, Wright is "most controversial – at least for confessional and evangelical Protestants" – when it comes to justification.¹⁴⁸ On first glance, however, there is agreement between (the later) Schreiner and Wright on the nature of justification: It is forensic, not transformative. Though acknowledging Schreiner's change of mind, Wright criticizes several features of Schreiner's "new" understanding, of which I highlight two: First, Schreiner should have embraced a "covenantal meaning" of justification, "which would not have undermined the 'forensic' one but rather enhanced it" (*PFG* 958n518). In his theology of Paul, Schreiner had discussed Wright's well-known covenantal view as being "enormously popular," but eventually dismissed it: "God's righteousness surely fulfills his covenantal promises, but

¹⁴³ Schreiner, *Paul*, 209.

¹⁴⁴ Schreiner, *Paul*, 208; cf. 194.

¹⁴⁵ Schreiner, *Paul*, 197n16. For instance, in line with and with reference to Wright, Schreiner deems it fitting "to describe the redemption in Christ as freedom from exile since the promises in Isaiah were not completely fulfilled in his day" (230; cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 108–9n7 and his defense of Wright against Mark Seifrid's cautions).

¹⁴⁶ Schreiner, *Paul*, 197, 73n1. Schreiner has also called Wright's interpretation of 2 Cor 5:21 "strange and completely implausible" (201n22; cf. Wright's response in *PFG* 881n300, and again Thomas S. Schreiner, "Paul's Place in the Story: N. T. Wright's Vision of Paul," *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 4 [2014]: 1–26 [25]).

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Schreiner, "Paul's Place," 22–26, and Wright's rejoinder in "Right Standing," 100. In *PFG* Wright explicitly mentions as other points of contention the way how Schreiner works out the "centrality of God" within Paul's thought (*PFG* 626n26), his understanding of the phrase *πίστις Χριστοῦ* as an objective genitive (*PFG* 836n182), and his interpretation of Israel's role according to Rom 11:25–27 (*PFG* 1244n686).

¹⁴⁸ Schreiner, "Paul's Place," 22.

it does not follow from this that we should define righteousness as covenantal faithfulness.”¹⁴⁹ Second, another contentious issue is the role of the spirit, or more precisely, the relationship of the spirit to faith, justification, and transformation.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, as Gordon Fee has argued, this is “one of the more complex issues” in the writings of Paul.¹⁵¹ While Fee, with good reason, rejects the construction of a clear logical and temporal sequence, both Wright and Schreiner assume such a sequence, though with opposing order: Schreiner suggests that “the forensic gift of righteousness becomes the basis (and the only basis) on which believers receive God’s powerful Spirit,”¹⁵² whereas Wright argues that “the spirit works ... to generate faith in humans” (PFG 952) and that the same spirit “produces the radically transformed life” (PFG 957). Apart from their disagreement over the place and role of the spirit within the *ordo salutis*, they agree that Paul was profoundly concerned with appropriate Christian living through the power of the spirit – a concern that western protestant tradition tended to eclipse for fear of the intrusion of works-righteousness (cf. PFG 1096n223).¹⁵³

This is not the place to enter into an in-depth discussion of Paul’s understanding of justification. I will leave it at a few remarks on Wright’s proposal, indicating my impression that his analysis not only fails to do justice to basic Pauline thought structures but is also inconsistent by its own presuppositions. First, the attempt to find appropriate schemes and labels for specific dimensions of Paul’s thinking runs the risk of making a “category mistake” (cf. PFG 530) and of separating what for Paul actually belongs together. A clear-cut attribution of justification to the forensic realm, divorcing it from transformation, does not account for the inextricable connection of being and act in Paul. The status of righteousness and living out one’s righteousness are intertwined, the alternative between *iustitia imputativa* and *iustitia efficax* is

¹⁴⁹ Schreiner, *Paul*, 197, 199; cf. “Paul’s Place,” 22–23. On this, see again PFG 928n435: “The attempt to split up ‘covenant’ and ‘righteousness’ ... fails not least because of Paul’s central use of Gen. 15 where the two are inextricably intertwined.” On Paul’s silence on the covenant in Rom 4, see also Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith in Romans 4: Paul’s Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Gen 15:6*, WUNT II 224 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 419–20.

¹⁵⁰ On these issues, cf. the contributions by Volker Rabens, Frank D. Macchia and John R. Levison.

¹⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 853. Fee goes on: “Its very complexity bears mute witness against our attempt to fit all of Paul’s words about the Spirit into our own prior categories.”

¹⁵² Schreiner, *Paul*, 194. Wright also disapproves of Schreiner’s using the term “gift” within the description of the forensic category of righteousness (PFG 991n616).

¹⁵³ See especially Wright’s popular book N. T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010) (= *After You Believe* [San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010]).

inadequate.¹⁵⁴ In other words, God is both judge and creator in the process of justification, and his “creative justification” really effects something. God not only declares that someone is “in the right,” but at the same time his declaration “*creates* the status it confers,” as Wright correctly states (PFG 946).¹⁵⁵ Here we encounter an immanent inconsistency in Wright’s account. He draws on speech-act theory and cites approvingly Anthony Thiselton’s insight that the declaration of justification is an “illocutionary speech-act of declaration and verdict” (PFG 945). But he obviously does not recognize the theological impact of the idea of a performative verbal pronouncement.¹⁵⁶ Michael Gorman in particular takes him to task in this regard, asking: Does Wright’s “justification really *effect* anything, or does it just *announce* or perhaps *acknowledge* something?” And he summarizes the difference between Wright and himself this way:

[for Wright,] justification is a divine acknowledgment of human faith and a declaration of ‘status’ – the status being ‘in’ (which hardly seems very illocutionary) – whereas for me justification is a divine act of incorporation (change of location) and transformation (change of identity). The difference is subtle but significant.¹⁵⁷

The dispute between Schreiner and Wright regarding the work of the spirit is rooted in the ambiguity of Paul’s own reasoning (e.g., Gal 3:2–5; 5:22; 1 Cor 12:8; 13:2; 2 Cor 4:13). After considering the relevant Pauline passages, Fee concludes

that faith itself, as a work of the Spirit, leads to the experienced reception of the Spirit that also comes through that same faith. Although it does not fit our logical schemes well, the Spirit is thus both the cause and the effect of faith.¹⁵⁸

This paradoxical duplicity should not be dissolved in one or the other way for the sake of some kind of secondary logic. Schreiner (like Bultmann and

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith*, 337, with reference to Eberhard Jüngel, *Jesus und Paulus: Eine Untersuchung zur Präzisierung der Frage nach dem Ursprung der Christologie*, HUT 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1962), 46.

¹⁵⁵ The phrase “creative justification” (“schöpferische Rechtfertigung”) has been coined by Peter Stuhlmacher to express the idea “[dass] Gott in der Rechtfertigung nicht nur (be-)urteilend, sondern ständig schaffend auf den Plan tritt” (Peter Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus*, 2nd ed., FRLANT 87 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 220n1).

¹⁵⁶ On justification and speech-acts, cf. also the comments in Section 1 of Richard Bell’s contribution.

¹⁵⁷ Gorman, “Wright about Much,” 36; cf. Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 102.

¹⁵⁸ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 853. Similarly already Schlatter, *Glaube*, 365; cf. 460n1: “Die Schwierigkeit für die Benennung entsteht hier überall aus der Begrenztheit unseres Bewusstseins, das sich Gleichzeitiges als einander folgend vorstellen muss und von den echten Kausalvermögen nur dürftige Ahnungen hat.”

Wolter) opts for a sequence of faith/righteousness and the gift of the spirit,¹⁵⁹ while Wright (like Schnelle) sees a direct link between the spirit's inspiring "the first whisper of faith" and the spirit's going to work "so that the person who has believed 'does the work of the law'" (PFG 954).¹⁶⁰

4.3 Human Plight and Divine Solution

Schreiner places great emphasis on the human "plight"; about one tenth of his book – 50 pages out of 500 – deal with the problem "that something has gone wrong in the world."¹⁶¹ It is no wonder that in his review of PFG he complains that the wrath of God and the judgment to come "does not receive enough attention" in Wright's "exceedingly long book on Paul."¹⁶²

The brevity of his comments have consequences, for he does not give the same weight to escaping God's wrath and the final judgment as Paul does. Getting the story right does not mean just including every bit of the story; it also means that each element in Paul's theology is given proper weight.¹⁶³

In his own theology of Paul, Schreiner goes to great lengths to explore the depth of sin, the essence of which is "the failure to honor God as God."¹⁶⁴ The more terrifying the abyss of sin and the ensuing wrath of God, the more glowing the "joy of salvation."¹⁶⁵ Obviously, highlighting the dramatic contrast between the Adamic dishonoring of God and believers' glorifying God in Christ is at the theological heart of Schreiner, and he sees it at the heart of Paul. Therefore, he criticizes that Wright "does not linger over what sin is" and "does not focus on its refusal to honor and glorify God."¹⁶⁶

Wright explains that "Paul did not retain an original 'plight' and merely discover that Jesus was the 'solution' to it" (cf. Schreiner, but also Bultmann¹⁶⁷), nor was he "plightless, confronted with a 'solution' for which he felt compelled to cobble together a somewhat random 'plight'" (cf. Sanders

¹⁵⁹ Schreiner, *Paul*, 194. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:330; Wolter, *Paulus*, 80–81.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Schnelle, *Paulus*, 570 (= *Paul*, 522). See further Volker Rabens, "Power from In Between: The Relational Experience of the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in Paul's Churches," in *The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament and Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Max Turner*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, Volker Rabens, and Cornelis Bennema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 138–55 (142). On "doing the Torah," cf. Gregory Tatum's essay.

¹⁶¹ Schreiner, *Paul*, 103. The relevant chapters are called "Dishonoring God: The Violation of God's Law" (103–25) and "Dishonoring God: The Power of Sin" (127–50).

¹⁶² Schreiner, "Paul's Place," 23.

¹⁶³ Schreiner, "Paul's Place," 24.

¹⁶⁴ Schreiner, *Paul*, 127.

¹⁶⁵ Schreiner, *Paul*, 151.

¹⁶⁶ Schreiner, "Paul's Place," 24.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1:191.

and Schnelle¹⁶⁸) (PFG 752). The antithesis is a false one.¹⁶⁹ Rather, according to Wright Paul rethought the plight of humanity and the cosmos in light of the revelation of Jesus in a revolutionary manner: It was Israel's purpose to provide the solution to the problems of the rest of the world, but the "tumultuous apocalypse focused on the crucified Messiah" unveiled the problem in its "horrible depth" and revealed that "that the chosen people themselves were just as much part of that problem as anyone else" (PFG 772). This poses the poignant question of the validity of God's election of Israel, of its vocation to be the light of the world. Here we find ourselves in the "heart of Paul's theology," and indeed in the heart of Wright's theology of Paul:

At the heart of Paul's theology, holding together its many varied features in a single, supple, harmonious whole, we find his passionate conviction that the ancient divine solution to the world's problems had not been changed. The creator God would indeed save the world through Abraham's seed. Israel would indeed be the light of the world. But all this, Paul believed, had been fulfilled, and thereby redefined, in and around Israel's Messiah and the holy spirit. (PFG 772)

The question of course remains: Where does Paul say what Wright presupposes throughout, namely that God "will save the world *through Israel*" (PFG 840; cf. 511, 814, 912) and that Jesus, the "faithful Israelite," takes the place of (unfaithful) Israel so that God can remain faithful to his "covenant plan" (PFG 1470; cf. 498, 531)?¹⁷⁰ For Wright and those who are willing to follow him, the logic works out immaculately once

we understand *Christos* as the Messiah, Israel's representative, Israel-in-person if you will ... (a) The covenant God promises to rescue and bless the world through Israel. (b) Israel as it stands is faithless to this commission. (c) The covenant God, however, is faithful, and will provide a faithful Israelite, *the* 'faithful Israelite', the Messiah. (PFG 839)¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 544–45 (= *Paul*, 502): "The Pauline doctrine of sin is thus in practice the attempt at a later and supplementary rationalization for the already firmly fixed conclusion of an argument. Also, the relation between the character of sin as a power/fate and a particular deed ... results from Paul's cognitive starting point: the magnitude of the saving act by which all human beings can be saved must correspond to the magnitude of the fate in which all human beings are enmeshed."

¹⁶⁹ Cf. already Wright, *Climax*, 260. Dunn has also offered a christologically formed redefinition of the plight-solution scheme, though with a different emphasis. He is convinced that "Paul's gospel met real and felt needs" (Dunn, *Paul*, 332) and that his addressees experienced the gospel as a positive, liberating transformation, as a God-given "solution" to their human "plight" (cf. 53, 181, 225). On the other hand, Dunn holds that Paul's theologizing has been radically reshaped in the light of his christophany and thus reflects a retrospective rationalizing of a life-changing event. Therefore, "in some sense at least Paul did reconstruct his theology 'from solution to plight'" (181). Cf. also, on this issue, the comments by Volker Rabens.

¹⁷⁰ On "faithfulness" as a characteristic of God, cf. the essay by Torsten Jantsch.

¹⁷¹ On the issue of "messiah" in general, cf. the essay by Aquila Lee.

This logic elucidates how God decided to cure the disease from which all humans, Jews and Gentiles, were suffering (cf. *PFG* 770), and it also alerts to his “radically revised view of election,” which dovetails with his “radically revised view of a monotheistically framed ‘problem of evil’” (*PFG* 760–61). However, should the basic thesis about Christ prove labile – as insinuated not only by Schreiner – the whole intricate construction is in danger of collapsing like a house of cards.¹⁷²

5. Michael Wolter and N. T. Wright

5.1 Paul as an Inventor of Christian Identity

Wright’s attempt to fit together a “compelling ... single picture” (*PFG* 44) by way of his worldview-analysis resonates with Michael Wolter’s project that seeks to construct a general picture (*Gesamtbild*) of Paul’s theology by way of his *Sinnwelt*-analysis.¹⁷³ Both enterprises are profoundly hermeneutical in their design, while the results betray their widely divergent academic traditions and philosophical frames of reference. In the prologue of his work, Wolter clarifies that he does not present a theology “according” to Paul, but a theology, which is “contained” in Paul’s letter. He does not claim to have discovered a foundational system of thought at the basis of, or beyond the actual texts; still, he attempts to create an image of Paul’s theology beyond the contingencies of his letter writing (cf. *PFG* 45). Wolter places “Christ-faith” at the center of Paul’s theology and identifies three dimensions of faith, of which the last stands in tension to the first: a soteriological, a social, and an epistemological one. Faith is more than a selective acceptance of religious truths, more than the human relationship to God or to oneself, but rather a comprehensive concept of reality (*Wirklichkeitsverständnis*), which constitutes the exclusive identity of the Pauline congregations and which demarcates them from their Jewish and non-Jewish context. Faith functions both as “identity marker” and as “boundary marker,” which overrides the distinction between Jews and non-Jews.¹⁷⁴ As such, “faith imparts membership to God’s

¹⁷² Cf. Schreiner, “Paul’s Place,” 21. Chris Tilling also objects to Wright’s concept of “evil” (Tilling, “Review Essay,” 57–58), arguing that the Wrightian language of “disease” or “infection” superimposes itself on the Pauline language of “enslavement”: The matters that Paul associates with “evil” (such as sin, death, flesh, etc.) “exercise force and in so doing enslave” (57).

¹⁷³ Cf. Wolter, *Paulus*, 2. On Wolter’s book, see the collection of essays in Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser, eds., *Theologie des Paulus in der Diskussion: Reflexionen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters Grundriss*, Biblisch-theologische Studien 140 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013).

¹⁷⁴ Wolter, *Paulus*, 83–84.

people and participation in God's salvation."¹⁷⁵ The social function of faith is therefore inherently related to a soteriological one. However, this determination of faith is in tension with Wolter's assertion that faith is by its nature a cognitive entity with epistemological significance.¹⁷⁶ Accordingly, faith not only makes ineffective the differences between ethnic groups but also defines the "fundamental difference between a Christian and non-Christian concept of reality."¹⁷⁷ Either one is inside the *Sinnwelt* of faith, or outside; the realities on both sides are completely different.¹⁷⁸ In other words, faith considers a previously unknown reality as the reality of God, in relation to which all other concepts of reality are realities of the "flesh," i.e., realities created by humans.¹⁷⁹ Faith remains "abstract" (*unanschaulich*) – just like "love" or "sin" – for outward appearances do not testify to one's faith.¹⁸⁰ As the cognitive comprehension of a certain concept of reality, faith does not enclose social and ethical transformation but produces it.¹⁸¹ We are reminded of Bultmann, who argued for a similar cognitive character of faith, stating that the reality of "man prior to the revelation of faith" can only be seen and described from the standpoint of faith and that it does not come along with a tangible inner transformation.

Others have already noted the remarkable fact that although Wright is a most prominent figure in Anglophone Pauline scholarship and in the formation of the "New Perspective," his work has not been properly discussed in the German-speaking sphere.¹⁸² Wolter's Pauline theology in fact is a case in

¹⁷⁵ Wolter, *Paulus*, 406.

¹⁷⁶ Wolter, *Paulus*, 85–86. Wolter himself calls this evidence a "characteristic tension for the Pauline congregations."

¹⁷⁷ Wolter, *Paulus*, 126.

¹⁷⁸ Wolter, *Paulus*, 92. Elsewhere Wolter argued that it is of pivotal significance to distinguish the external perspective from the internal perspective (Michael Wolter, "Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν πρὸς ταῦτα;," in *Theologie des Paulus in der Diskussion: Reflexionen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters Grundriss*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser, *Biblisch-theologische Studien* 140 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013], 257–87, 264–66).

¹⁷⁹ Wolter, *Paulus*, 95.

¹⁸⁰ Wolter, *Paulus*, 86, 263 ("man kann niemandem ansehen, ob er glaubt oder getauft ist").

¹⁸¹ On a harsh critique of Wolter's concept of faith, see Stefan Alkier, "Konstruktionen des Glaubens: Terminologische, philosophische und theologische Probleme in Michael Wolters Konzept des Glaubens als Wirklichkeitsgewissheit," in *Theologie des Paulus in der Diskussion: Reflexionen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters Grundriss*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser, *Biblisch-theologische Studien* 140 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013), 81–113; see also Schliesser, "Paulustheologien," 73–74.

¹⁸² Cf. Simon J. Gathercole, "Deutsche Erwidern auf die 'New Perspective': Eine anglophone Sicht," in *Theologie des Paulus in der Diskussion: Reflexionen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters Grundriss*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser, *Biblisch-theologische Studien* 140 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013), 115–53, 134.

point: Despite occasional convergences with “New Perspective” ideas, he entirely ignores Wright’s work. Vice versa, Wolter’s Pauline theology is not a key dialogue partner for Wright. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to compare certain facets of their construals. Over some aspects such as the interpretation of the syntagma *πίστις Χριστοῦ* they could not disagree more, while in other respects such as the place of “justification” they are close together.

5.2 Christ-Faith and Christ’s Faith

In accordance with Wolter, Wright highlights the social and soteriological function of faith, showing a remarkable proclivity for the “badge”-metaphor. Whereas Jews agreed that “the ‘works of Torah’ in the sense of sabbath, circumcision and food-laws ... were the badges one would wear” (PFG 186; cf. 79, 361, 929, 966, 1034), in the Pauline worldview this place is taken by *πίστις*: “*pistis* is the badge that functions ... as the sign of membership in God’s people” (PFG 406), as the “one and only both necessary and sufficient badge of membership in the Abrahamic family” (PFG 363). Becoming a member of God’s people is equivalent to being declared to be “in the right,” to being justified, and this status is given on the basis of *πίστις* (PFG 832). However, with regard to the character and nature of this badge, there is utmost disagreement between Wolter and Wright, at the basis of which lies their divergent interpretations of *πίστις Χριστοῦ*. For Wright, faith is not merely a cognitive entity, and it does not simply conceptualize a reality, but rather entails displaying the “Messiah-badge” (PFG 931, 952, 991) and living out the reality it represents. The badge of faith “is defined in close relation to the Messiah” (PFG 363) and worn “on the basis of the Messiah’s own faithfulness” (PFG 991). Indeed, “Jesus’ *pistis* evokes the *pistis* of all those who believe the gospel” (PFG 1000). Paul’s understanding of *πίστις* includes “cross-and-resurrection-shaped belief, trust and faithfulness” (PFG 931), “‘weakness’, suffering, shame and ultimately death” (PFG 432), but also “spoken ‘faith’” (PFG 383). Faith is “what it is because it looks away from itself, and looks towards, and leans all its weight upon, the single act of the one God in the Messiah” (PFG 952). By contrast, Wolter’s sharp distinction between the external and internal (“cognitive”) affords to him an (all too) evident answer to the interpretation of the debated phrase *πίστις Χριστοῦ*. Only from the perspective of faith can Jesus’s death be regarded as a “loving act of faithfulness (*πίστις*) to God.”¹⁸³ Jesus’s faithfulness is not a reality *per*

¹⁸³ Wolter, *Paulus*, 77, quoting Richard B. Hays, “Πίστις and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake?” [1997], in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, by Richard B. Hays, 2nd ed., Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 272–97 (275).

se but only a reality of the faith of the believers: “After all, solely ‘faith in Christ’ can say that there is something like the ‘faith of Christ.’”¹⁸⁴

Their opposing understandings of *πίστις Χριστοῦ* suggests that Wolter and Wright are not only poles apart with respect to their concept of “faith” but also with respect to their concept of “Christ.” For Wolter, Paul’s proclamation of Christ is exclusively focused on his death and resurrection as a single salvific event; it is a reality of faith (*Glaubenswirklichkeit*), which discloses itself solely to believers, and which is only real inasmuch as faith itself ascribes to it a salvific effect.¹⁸⁵ The idea of faith being a cognitive activity is carried to extremes here. Faith appears as the mental key player that ascribes meaning to the story of Jesus Christ, a salvific effect to Christ’s death, and existential significance to our existence “in Christ.”¹⁸⁶ “In Christ” is the leading paradigm of the *Sinnwelt* of faith, the simple, general characterization of their Christian identity.¹⁸⁷ Christ-faith – understood in cognitive terms – effects and characterizes believers’ mode of existence “in Christ” and implies nothing like a local-mystical or transformative notion.¹⁸⁸ Beyond the reality of faith, both Christ’s life and death, and our being “in Christ” are neither invested with meaning nor comprehensible or tangible by “outsiders.” Accordingly, the “objective” data of Christ’s biography – his character, his proclamation, his deeds, his political impact – are not of interest to Wolter (nor to Wolter’s Paul) but only Christ as “abbreviation” for Paul’s missionary proclamation, to which faith attributes meaning.¹⁸⁹ In contrast to Wolter, Wright offers a “christology” whose relevance pertains to a world beyond the reality of faith, to the *real* world, even to the political realm. For Wright, one does not have to be a believer to get a grasp of the implication of the Messiah’s faithfulness in relation to the story of Israel (cf. *PFG* 840), to perceive the political cutting-edge of Paul’s messianism, and to appreciate the transformative impact of a person being “in Christ.” In whatever way we should assess the single interpretative issues, Wolter’s cognitive-metaphorical perspective

¹⁸⁴ Wolter, *Paulus*, 77. Quite boldly Wolter contends that, from a theological perspective, supporters of the subjective genitive interpretation did not think through to the end their proposal. Wolter’s certitude has been zeroed in on by Wolfgang Stegemann, “Wie wörtlich müssen wir die Worte des Apostel Paulus nehmen? Einige Überlegungen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters ‘Grundriss der Theologie des Paulus,’” in *Theologie des Paulus in der Diskussion: Reflexionen im Anschluss an Michael Wolters Grundriss*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser, *Biblisch-theologische Studien* 140 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013), 185–212 (187–90).

¹⁸⁵ Wolter, *Paulus*, 99. “Wirklichkeitscharakter kommt der Heilswirkung des Todes Jesu darum nur zu, als ihm der Glaube eine solche Wirkung zuschreibt.”

¹⁸⁶ Wolter, *Paulus*, 77, 99, 91.

¹⁸⁷ Wolter, *Paulus*, 240–41.

¹⁸⁸ Wolter, *Paulus*, 244.

¹⁸⁹ Wolter, *Paulus*, 64.

surely fails to do justice to the realism of Paul's thinking, which does not confine "Christ-faith" to a new *Sinnwelt* but reckons with tangible transformations in the real world. As no other Pauline theology discussed, Wright's has underlined the realism of Paul's thought. On the other hand, both Wolter and Wright miss the profoundly relational and emotional dynamics of Pauline christology. Wolter fails to see the significance of Christ's actual presence as a result of his cognitivist approach while Wright's blind spot is due to his description of Paul's "christological monotheism" as "an agenda" (PFG 734) – an overly pragmatic description given the "mystical" overtones of Paul's "in Christ"-language.¹⁹⁰

5.3 Justification – An "Ecclesiological Doctrine"

Reading Wolter's "Theology of Paul" against the backdrop of the German academic tradition, one is struck by the fact that he decided to place the chapter on justification almost at the end (ch. xiii), after the chapters on ecclesiology (ch. xi) and ethics (ch. xii). He is well aware that with this decision he lines up with proponents of the "New Perspective," who typically position the doctrine of justification in the dogmatic *locus* of ecclesiology, not in anthropology, as does the "Lutheran Perspective."¹⁹¹ As might be expected, some reviewers have commented on this critically,¹⁹² but the arrangement is obviously rooted in Wolter's conviction that Paul's doctrine of justification is an "ecclesiological theory"¹⁹³ or – somewhat differently – a "soteriological theory" having its proper place in ecclesiology.¹⁹⁴ Wolter finds a straightforward, rather pragmatic connection between the anthropological-soteriological and the ecclesiological dimensions of Paul's justification theory: "Ecclesiology stands for the problem, anthropology is part of the solution, or, ecclesiology poses the question, anthropology pertains to the answer."¹⁹⁵ Wright and Wolter seem to agree in their placing of justification in the framework of ecclesiology. In earlier publications, Wright attempted to keep the soteriologi-

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Tilling, "Review Essay," 61. See also Schnelle, *Paulus*, 304 (= *Paul*, 292) on the "communion with Christ." It "not only opens a new understanding of reality but indeed creates a new reality that equally includes the cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic dimensions of human existence." On the issue of Paul's "in-Christ"-language, cf. now the essay by J. Thomas Hewitt and Matthew V. Novenson.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Wolter, "Τί οὖν ἐποϋμεν," 277–78.

¹⁹² Dieter Zeller says ironically that the chapter on justification has the unlucky number 13. He deems it problematic that justification should follow upon moral deeds (Dieter Zeller, "Gedanken zu Michael Wolters Paulusbuch," *BZ* [2013]: 122–29 [122–23]).

¹⁹³ Wolter, *Paulus*, 5.

¹⁹⁴ Wolter, *Paulus*, 406.

¹⁹⁵ Wolter, "Τί οὖν ἐποϋμεν," 278; cf. Wolter, *Paulus*, 406.

ical dimension at arm's length from justification,¹⁹⁶ whereas in recent years he tends to relate the two dogmatic *loci* in a more integrative way.¹⁹⁷ Though he does not use the terminology, justification seems to represent for Wright an “abstract,” *unanschaulich* category, just as faith does for Wolter. Justification does not stand for a transformative event but for a declarative speech-act, similar to the marriage registrar's declaration: “I pronounce that they are husband and wife” (cf. *PFG* 945). As a consequence, there is a remarkable discrepancy in Wright's account between the concepts of “faith” and “justification”: His stress on the tangibility of faith chafes at his rather “thin” description of justification; whereas faith means living out the reality it represents, justification remains strictly confined to the declarative realm, effecting the change of a status but not the existential realization of this new status. Wolter is quite consistent in that he associates the *unanschaulich* entity of faith with a non-transformative meaning of justification.¹⁹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum we find Udo Schnelle's thoroughly transformative understanding of “justification by faith,” perceived as a subset of Paul's participatory soteriology.

6. Udo Schnelle and N. T. Wright

6.1 Paul as a Versatile Cross-Cultural Hermeneut

Udo Schnelle's reconstruction of Pauline theology is characterized by two closely related basic tenets, both of which surface already in his dissertation and pervade his entire work on Paul. First, Paul's theology has been subject to significant modifications, and, second, despite such modifications, it displays thematic coherence: All of his letters are deeply shaped by the ideas of transformation and participation. The theology of Paul “cannot be delineated in the timeless form of a doctrinal system of central theological concepts”¹⁹⁹ since historical and biographical contingencies elicited major modifications of his thought. Schnelle wants to use the term “modifications” in a neutral sense and applies it to aspects of Paul's theology that reveal “substantial

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119: “In standard Christian language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.”

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Gathercole, “Deutsche Erwiderungen,” 148n139.

¹⁹⁸ Cf., e.g., Wolter, *Paulus*, 344.

¹⁹⁹ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 19 (= *Paul*, 42). See most recently Udo Schnelle, “Gibt es eine Entwicklung in der Rechtfertigungslehre vom Galater- zum Römerbrief?,” in *Paulus – Werk und Wirkung: Festschrift für Andreas Lindemann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Paul-Gerhard Klumbies and David S. du Toit (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 289–309.

changes ... in the course of several letters.”²⁰⁰ Most importantly, such modifications occurred in Paul’s idea of justification: “A consistent Pauline doctrine of justification is ... a fiction!”²⁰¹ Schnelle does not dispute the relevance of Paul’s Damascus experience for his understanding of the law and righteousness, but maintains that the Pauline writings represent a later stage of his theology and “cannot simply be traced back ... to the Damascus experience.”²⁰² Schnelle summarizes succinctly: “The *subject matter* of justification and law had always been present with Paul ..., but not the *doctrine* of justification and law as found in Galatians and Romans.”²⁰³ The latter was the result of “retrospective rationalizations.”²⁰⁴ Paul’s doctrine of justification, which makes its first literary appearance in Gal 2:16, represents a “*new response to a new situation*.”²⁰⁵ When his opponents radically challenged his missionary work, he took the decisive step towards an exclusive doctrine of justification. This step is more than an activation or actualization of his conversion, but rather a “really new insight and argumentation within Paul’s thought.”²⁰⁶

In spite of the fluidity of Paul’s thought, Schnelle affirms that he was a “significant thinker,” whose work possesses “systematic quality” and who stands in comparison with the philosophers of his time.²⁰⁷ The second major feature in Schnelle’s reconstruction of Paul’s theology therefore concerns the question of the heart of Paul’s theology. Schnelle is convinced that the doctrine of justification should not be elevated as the “central interpretament of Pauline theology.”²⁰⁸ He proposes a “hermeneutics of distinction,” which differentiates between the “abiding deep insight, the determining structure, and the inner logic” of Paul’s thinking from the “applications based on these

²⁰⁰ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 22 (= *Paul*, 43).

²⁰¹ This is an early statement of Schnelle made in his dissertation *Gerechtigkeit und Christusgegenwart: Vorpaulinische und paulinische Tauftheologie*, GTA 24, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 100.

²⁰² Schnelle, *Paulus*, 90 (= *Paul*, 99).

²⁰³ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 91 (= *Paul*, 100).

²⁰⁴ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 421 (= *Paul*, 391).

²⁰⁵ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 312 (= *Paul*, 299).

²⁰⁶ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 312n131 (= *Paul*, 299n120). The new edition of Schnelle’s book features an extensive critique of Wolter’s proposal to differentiate between the context of discovery (*Entdeckungszusammenhang*) and the context of rationalization (*Begründungszusammenhang*) of Paul’s doctrine of justification (cf. Wolter, *Paulus*, 404).

²⁰⁷ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 25 (= *Paul*, 46). In the preface to the new edition, Schnelle remarks that in his revision he intended to undergird in particular the idea Paul was a veritable theological thinker. Contrast, e.g., E. P. Sanders, “Paul,” in *Early Christian Thought in Its Jewish Context*, ed. John M. G. Barclay and John P. M. Sweet, FS Morna Hooker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 112–29 (124): “As a religious genius, he was free of the academic requirement of systematic consistency.”

²⁰⁸ Schnelle, *Gerechtigkeit*, 165.

guidelines but shaped by the actual situations.”²⁰⁹ Clearly, for Schnelle, the doctrine of justification is a situational application of a deeper, central truth, which he conceptualizes as the “new possibility of human existence, opened up in Jesus Christ, realized in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to be completed at the parousia of the Lord.”²¹⁰ In other words, “basis and center” of Paul’s theology is the “eschatological presence of God’s salvation in Jesus.”²¹¹ Schnelle’s appreciation of interpreters such as Wrede and Schweitzer is evident when he declares “that it is not juridical categories but the concepts of transformation and participation that always provide the foundation of Pauline thought” – even in Galatians and Romans.²¹² However, he does not follow Wrede’s and Schweitzer’s depreciation of the doctrine of justification and calls it a mistake.²¹³ Christ’s resurrection marks the beginning of an all-encompassing process of transformation, which “will end with the transformation of the whole creation into the glory of God.”²¹⁴ God initiated the new being with Christ, and those who belong to Christ participate in this universal process and in the present and future salvation.²¹⁵ Joining the reality of salvation occurs in baptism, for “in the ritual, the theological and social construction of the new person ‘in Christ’ takes place.”²¹⁶ The agent creating the new being is the Holy Spirit, who seizes the entire existence of the Christians and becomes “power and principle” of their new lives.²¹⁷ In the end, justification and participation stand for two soteriological models of which the first represents a late and secondary, but nevertheless appropriate, interpretation of the Christ-event.

The two tenets of Schnelle’s theology of Paul provide the basis of the following comparison between Wright and Schnelle. As for an immediate dialogue between the two interpreters, it needs to be noted that in *PFG* Wright does refer to Schnelle on several occasions but without engaging with the specific historical and theological profile of Schnelle’s account. Schnelle, on the other hand, had ignored Wright’s work in the first edition of his Pauline theology with one notable exception relating to the anti-imperial emphasis of Paul’s thought. In the second edition, Schnelle deepens this aspect of their

²⁰⁹ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 22 (= *Paul*, 44)

²¹⁰ Schnelle, *Gerechtigkeit*, 165.

²¹¹ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 419 (= *Paul*, 389).

²¹² Schnelle, *Paulus*, 422 (= *Paul*, 391). Cf. the chapter “Soteriology: The Transfer Has Begun” (*Paulus*, 515–25 [= *Paul*, 478–85]) and Udo Schnelle, “Transformation und Partizipation als Grundgedanken paulinischer Theologie,” *NTS* 47 (2001): 58–75.

²¹³ Cf. Schnelle, *Gerechtigkeit*, 102–103.

²¹⁴ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 421 (= *Paul*, 390).

²¹⁵ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 632 (= *Paul*, 579).

²¹⁶ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 517 (= *Paul*, 479–80).

²¹⁷ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 530 (= *Paul*, 490).

scholarly exchange and extends it to a critical evaluation of Wright's thesis that Paul confronted and undermined the worldview of his pagan audience.

6.2 *The Systematic Quality of Paul's Thought*

Wright is not interested in the question of modifications and changes in the apostle's thinking, nor does he intend to weigh or play off against each other the various strands or themes of Paul's theology.²¹⁸ This is not least due to a preliminary hermeneutical decision: Wright calls it "the serious, scientific imperative to get in all the data" (PFG 45) and elsewhere asserts quite frankly that he is looking for a coherence "in which the different major themes, and their varied contextual expression, will be seen to offer mutual reinforcement even if not always expressed in precisely the same terminology" (PFG 617). He does not presuppose a "cheap coherence" of Paul's thinking, but rather a "kind of harmony which often characterizes profound thinkers" (PFG 45). A musical metaphor, which resounds time and again in Wright's work, might allow us to perceive his image of the apostle more clearly: Paul is described as a virtuoso "symphonist" (PFG 453), who at the top of his game wrote Romans, a "tightly composed symphonic whole" (PFG 1209; cf. 397) with four movements that have their own integrity but are also interconnected in a creative way (PFG 1011). Not only this particular letter but also his work as a whole calls for a "symphonic" hermeneutics rather than a reconstruction of the "sequence of separate songs" (PFG 46). More concretely, Wright argues that Paul's theology has an "inner coherence," which calls for an interpretation that balances potentially competitive perspectives:

'juristic', 'participationist', 'transformational', 'apocalyptic', 'covenantal' and 'salvation-historical' – and no doubt many more besides, including those old and potentially dualistic geometrical metaphors, 'vertical' and 'horizontal'. (PFG 609)

Clearly, such a "symphonic" reading that attends to the "big picture" is contrasted by Schnelle's more analytical, prosaic interpretation that focuses on the single tones and chords, their (broken) sequence and their (lack of) consonance. While their methodologies vary significantly, both exegetes agree that Paul was a deeply coherent thinker.

There is one specific interpretative issue in Wright's account that is repeatedly criticized by Schnelle: his assessment of Paul's view of the Torah.²¹⁹ Schnelle holds that Wright unduly reduces the Pauline critique of the Torah's origin and function and regards the role of the Torah unqualifiedly posi-

²¹⁸ When Wright discerns "the origin and development of Paul's view of justification" (PFG 965), he does so with a quite different agenda than Schnelle.

²¹⁹ On this issue, cf. also Gregory Tatum's essay.

tive.²²⁰ In his exegesis of Gal 3, Schnelle argues contrary to Wright that the “promises to Abraham and his authentic descendants derive directly from God, in contrast to which the law/Torah was merely a later supplement.”²²¹ Even more poignantly, Schnelle speaks of Paul’s dismantling the Torah by assigning to it a secondary rank, both in temporal and material terms.²²²

6.3 *The Pragmatics of the Doctrine of Justification*

Wright’s attention to the panoramic view of Paul’s theology keeps him from identifying a “center” to the apostle’s world of thought. Rather, he is looking for a “vantage point, a summit from which we can survey, and see the way to explore, the lesser hills and valleys, the pathways and streams, that form the complex landscape of the letters and their implicit worlds” (PFG 46). The “vantage point” that Wright has located and now wants his readers to discover is found in the assumption that

Paul remained a deeply Jewish theologian who had rethought and reworked every aspect of his native Jewish theology in the light of the Messiah and the spirit, resulting in his own vocational self-understanding as the apostle to the pagans. (PFG 46)

If one should retain the term “center,” it would have to refer to the “story of the Messiah,” around which “Paul’s worldview, and his theology, have been rethought” (PFG 22; cf. 485, 735). As indicated in the previous paragraph, Wright offers an account that seeks to transcend the binary opposition of “participation” and “justification.” But how do the two concepts relate to each other? In agreement with Schnelle (as well as Schweitzer and Wrede), Wright holds that the juridical language of justification belonged ultimately *within* the participationist language of “being in Christ,” though in obvious contrast to Schnelle and his precursors he does not think that juridical language is a “pragmatic offshoot of something more fundamental” (PFG 1039), owed perhaps to the critical situation in Galatia. Throughout his account, Wright takes great pains to show that “participation” and “justification” “co-exist perfectly coherently in Paul and ... should not be played off against one another” (PFG 1039).

²²⁰ Schnelle regards as futile all attempts at harmonizing the various strands of Pauline statements on the Torah, naming Wright as one author, who fails to differentiate between them (*Paulus*, 564n100, referring to PFG 1036).

²²¹ Schnelle (*Paulus*, 302n95, referring to PFG 871) holds that Wright bypasses the concrete exegetical problems of Gal 3 when he denies that Paul relativized the Torah and criticized its origin and function.

²²² Schnelle, *Paulus*, 559. Again, Schnelle refers to Wright as an opponent to this view, since Wright – wrongly according to Schnelle – says that “the mention of angels assisting in the giving of Torah, or of its being given through a ‘mediator’ in no way suggest that Tora is less than fully God-given and God-intended” (PFG 1033).

6.4 Empire and Philosophy

In line with Wright,²²³ and in striking contrast to Wolter, Schnelle is quite sympathetic to the anti-imperial reading of Paul. In view of the fact that in Thessalonica the emperor attained divine status, the early Christian preaching that God has enthroned the crucified Jesus of Nazareth as king “could have seemed anti-empire to those responsible for law and order in Thessalonica.”²²⁴ The Christ-hymn in Philippians with its proclamation of the self-humiliating Christ as the true lord (Phil 2:6–11) clearly possesses a political dimension, as does the title κύριος (2:11) and the title σωτήρ (3:20).²²⁵ When Christians used the word εὐαγγέλιον, this had “political-religious overtones and a virtually anti-imperial connotation,” and even Paul consciously drew on the political-religious semantics of the word in order to describe the salvific message of cross and resurrection.²²⁶ Notably, in the new edition of his monograph, Schnelle inserted a new chapter on “eschatology and cosmology,” including a section entitled “criticism of the Roman Empire?”²²⁷ There, he submits that in several instances Paul alludes to Roman imperial ideology, though without constructing a comprehensive and purposeful “anti-imperial” theology. Paul enacts a “theological revolution,” which is by far more foundational than any political revolution can be, for the transformation of the world has already occurred.²²⁸

According to Schnelle, Paul not only engages with imperial ideology but also, and even more thoroughly, with the philosophy of his times. Throughout his monograph, Schnelle highlights Paul’s ability to make contact with, and to enter into a discourse with contemporary philosophical concepts.²²⁹ He charges Wright with overemphasizing the differences between Paul and the philosophers and by that neglecting the openness of Paul’s theology to the existing discourses of the ancient world.²³⁰ As indicated, it is one of Schnelle’s argumentative goals to point to the intellectual achievement of the early Christian authors, particularly that of Paul. There is a marked perspectival difference in Schnelle’s and Wright’s assessments: Schnelle bases his

²²³ On *PFG* and the Roman empire, cf. the essay by Seyoon Kim.

²²⁴ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 164n122 (= *Paul* 163n106).

²²⁵ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 403.

²²⁶ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 437 (= *Paul*, 406). Schnelle refers to N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, FS Krister Stendahl (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 160–83.

²²⁷ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 655–57.

²²⁸ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 656, referring to *PFG* 1306–7: “Paul did not, however, advocate the normal sort of revolution ... A different kind of revolution. A different kind of ‘subversion’ – and, Paul would have said, a more powerful and effective one.”

²²⁹ Cf., e.g., Schnelle, *Paulus*, 670 (= *Paul*, 598). Schnelle prefers the term *Anschlussfähigkeit*, which could be rendered by “adaptability” or “compatibility.”

²³⁰ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 61 and 64n126.

judgment on the premises of a distinct theory of history, according to which “the formation of symbolic universes [*Sinnbildungen*] can only begin, become successful, and endure, if they manifest plausibility, the ability to make contact with and incorporate new concepts.”²³¹ In this sense, the “quality of Pauline theology as meaning formation [*Sinnbildung*] is seen in its *capacity for incorporation and combination*.”²³² By contrast, Wright chooses a theological starting point when he explicates the epistemological transformation taking place in Paul. While he “is well aware of ideas and worldviews ‘out there’” (PFG 1357), his epistemology is formatted christologically, revolutionized by the “Messiah of Israel.” Wright argues:

Ultimately, Paul does not have a quarrel with pagan philosophy, just as one does not have a quarrel with a jigsaw that is hard to do because fifty or more pieces are missing, so that those attempting the puzzle are reduced to joining together pieces that do not really belong ... Paul is proclaiming Jesus himself, and discovering as he does so that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge find their key in him. (PFG 1382)²³³

7. Conclusion

This essay pursued the goal of bringing out basic features of N. T. Wright’s Paul via a comparison with other major Pauline theologies. In the end, the combination of three propositions can be said to be unique to Wright’s (re)construction: the thesis of a thoroughly Jewish structure of Paul’s thought, the thesis of a single story of God’s people, and the thesis of a Christ-driven epistemological revolution. I will briefly explicate each of these propositions.

First, Wright delivers a forceful broadside against the “old perspective,” as represented by Rudolf Bultmann and his followers, who themselves are seen as inheritors of Martin Luther. According to the “old perspective,” as portrayed by Wright, “Paul had to ditch everything about his previous worldview, theology, and culture – the old symbols, the ancient stories, the praxis, the view of God himself” (PFG 460). No, says Wright: “Paul remained stubbornly and intentionally a deeply Jewish thinker” (PFG 1408). *Correct as this statement and major elements of his criticism may be, Wright*

²³¹ Schnelle, *Paulus*, 670 (= *Paul*, 598) (“Plausibilität, Anschlussfähigkeit und Erneuerungskraft”).

²³² Schnelle, *Paulus*, 11 (= *Paul*, 35): “Die Qualität der paulinischen Theologie als Sinnbildung zeigt sich in ihrer Anschlussfähigkeit.”

²³³ In an earlier publication, Wright had stated forthrightly: “The direction of Paul’s message was confrontation with paganism” and his missionary program constituted in replacing the pagan worldview “with an essentially Jewish one, reworked around Jesus” (Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 79). Schnelle disagrees with this “model of opposition,” as it cannot explain the missionary success of Paul, and instead makes the case for a “model of difference and adaptation” (Schnelle, *Paulus*, 61).

reinforces the contrast between “old” and “new” by a problematic and partly misleading portrayal of the “old perspective.” I have pointed out a number of critical issues above, most importantly the allegations of an anti-Jewish bias in “old perspective” representatives.

Second, Wright develops his “fresh perspective” on the basis of his insight that Paul offers a revolutionary redefinition of his worldview, theology, and culture around the Messiah Jesus. As a Pharisee Paul was aware of “*living in a continuous story*” and of “being called to be an actor within that drama” (PFG 113). The “cataclysmic revelation” (PFG 611) that Christ has been raised effected a radical transformation of his worldview and theology, though he remained convinced that there is a “single divine plan” (PFG 499), a “single story of the chosen people” (PFG 1017). The manner of how Wright has this Israel-story unfold distinguishes him markedly from the other Pauline theologies discussed; as we have seen, the “chapters” of this story are controversial without exception: 1) The covenant God has promised to Abraham not only to bless, but to save and rescue the world through Israel (PFG 504, 839–40); 2) Israel failed and was faithless to its commission to be the “light of the world” (PFG 564, 771, 927n429, 1049); 3) The “direct corollary” of Israel’s failure is the exile (PFG 503), a symbol of Israel’s own partaking in the darkness: “*Israel, too, is in Adam*” (PFG 895); 4) God, however, is faithful to his plan, as he provides “a faithful Israelite, the ‘faithful Israelite’, the Messiah” (PFG 839), an “Israel-in-person” (PFG 512, 521, 842) as “Israel’s substitute” (PFG 1182); 5) The Messiah is faithful to the God by his “obedience unto death; the faithful obedience which Israel should have offered but did not” (PFG 910); 6) Through his *πίστις*, he both accomplished the divine purpose and completed Israel’s vocation, bringing “rescue and restoration to the human race” (PFG 521); 7) Human *πίστις*, in turn, is evoked by Jesus’s *πίστις*; it is the “one and only both necessary and sufficient badge of membership in the Abrahamic family” (PFG 363); 8) Finally, the end and goal of Israel’s story “does not have to do with the abolition of the universe of space, time and matter, or the escape of humans from such a wreckage, but with its consummation” (PFG 163). *As has been seen, Wright’s re-reading and retelling of God’s single story in the light of the event of the Messiah is of compelling intrinsic cogency, but leaves much room for further discussion due to its “narratological positivism.”*

Third, now that the plan of God has finally come to fruition, it is time to bringing the mind into line with the present age. A Messiah-shaped, christological way of thinking reshapes human striving after wisdom and redefines Israel’s hope for salvation. To the philosophers Paul says: Put Christ “in the middle of the picture ... and all your aspirations after wisdom and right living will fit together at last” (PFG 1382). To the Jews Paul says: Put Christ “in the middle of ... history” and see that you will be compelled to evaluate afresh “more or less everything else ... ‘Look! The right time is now! Look! The

day of salvation is here!” (PFG 1061–62). Hence, Paul did not “ditch” his former Jewish beliefs, but “redefined” (or “reshaped,” “reworked,” “rethought”) them in a “revolutionary” (or “radical,” “fresh”) manner around the crucified Messiah: second-Temple monotheism (PFG 37, 702, 773, 1045), election (PFG 760–61, 899), eschatology (PFG 1094, 1258, 1306), the inherited stories and the single, larger story (PFG 114), the people of God (PFG 375, 760, 1027), the kingdom of God (PFG 627), Torah (PFG 1263, 1464), mysticism (PFG 415), to name but the most important. His redefined Jewish worldview does not seek to adapt to, but rather challenges “the world of ancient paganism” as a whole (PFG 21), including specific socio-cultural norms (PFG 9) and pagan “logic,” “physics,” “ethic,” “politics,” and “religion” in particular (PFG 1382). At the basis of all this is a renewed mind, a transformed act of knowing, an “epistemological revolution” (PFG 1355–56). *Highlighting the revolutionary transformation of Paul’s entire worldview in one word: his “worldview-redefinition” (PFG 369) is at the core of Wright’s enterprise and reveals a remarkably pragmatic epistemology in regard to the Christ-event.*

Paul and the Faithfulness of God is not a μέγα βιβλίον in Callimachus’s sense, but indeed a *magnum opus*, which will benefit all who engage with it. It is not a modest book, and its author is not modest either. Attempting to write a comprehensive account of “Christian Origins and the Question of God,” of which PFG is the fourth volume, demonstrates courage, confidence, and ambition. At the end of this eminent stage of the grand journey he declares that now his “sketch of Paul’s theology is complete” (PFG 1258), a statement emblematic for the scholarly habitus of this *grandseigneur* of New Testament studies. In times when virtually every day a new monograph or article on a particular issue of Paul’s theology sees the light of day (cf. PFG xxi), it is of inestimable value that from time to time seasoned scholars offer a synthesis, their “big picture” on the inventor of “Christian theology” (cf. PFG xvi). Wright wanted to write his work on Paul for forty years.²³⁴ We are grateful for his patience and eager to observe the reception of his mature work in the forty and more years to come.²³⁵

²³⁴ Bockmuehl, “Wright’s Paul,” 60 (Bockmuehl refers to a personal communication on 11 May 2013; cf. PFG xix). In 1973 Wright was 25 years old!

²³⁵ At a conference in Fribourg on N. T. Wright’s theology of Paul, Ulrich Luz stated: “I suppose that in fifty years one will speak of your overall view on Paul just as in our days one is appealing to Bultmann and Schweitzer” (11 June 2014; I am grateful to Ulrich Luz for making available to me the manuscript of his lecture).

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